

SO,ULS

SOULS

A COMEDY OF INTENTIONS

By

“RITA”

AUTHOR OF

“PEG THE RAKE”

“AN OLD ROGUE’S TRAGEDY

“THE SINNER”

“VANITY”

“A JILT’S JOURNAL,” ETC.

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DEDICATED
TO
THOSE WONDERFUL PEOPLE
WHO KNOW SO MUCH THAT IS USELESS
AND DO SO LITTLE THAT IS USEFUL.

December, 1902.

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PREFACE

IS there anything too scathing or too severe to be said of Modern Society at the present time? The Press teems with its scandals. The Divorce Court exposes its vicious intrigues and utter disregard of the common decencies of life. So-called "Society" journals treat it with such insolence as a few years ago would never have been tolerated. That high-born men and women lead no better life than that afforded by the gambling-table, the racecourse, the pursuit of secret vices that alone can please their jaded palates, is a lamentable fact—whose truth has been exposed again and again by open scandals. Scarcely a week passes but some high name is dragged into the mire of public opprobrium. Every year shows that Society marriages mean only divorce or disgrace, or hidden guilt connived at for personal reasons that are a shame to hint at. Even Religion must take the form of excitement or sensation to secure a following. When a West-end clergyman turns his church into a concert hall, and his congregation into a full-dress (or rather *undress*) audience, one might

suppose that the limit of good taste was reached by both parties. When a well-known journal inserts a paragraph requesting Society women to furnish it with news and scandals of their "smart" sisterhood, one might also imagine that Press insolence had outstripped the boundary of freedom, and would be rebuked or ostracised accordingly. But nothing of the sort takes place. Rather does it seem to add to Society's pride in its own daring, its own lack of good breeding, and its own degeneration. Could there possibly be a more flagrant instance of bad taste than the manner in which well-known women of the "Great World"—leaders of society—mobbed the Law Courts in order to listen to the indecent details of a recent divorce case? Or anything more indelicate than the way the general Press dwelt upon the accused woman's dress, manners, and appearance? The people who had agreed upon airing their grievances in Mr. Justice Barnes's Court were presumably ladies and gentlemen: had been educated expensively, and enjoyed means and leisure to cultivate their intelligence; yet their letters and mode of speech were a signal example of bad grammar, silliness, and slang. It seems, indeed, as if modern English Society had dispensed altogether with any restrictions of etiquette, or politeness, or good breeding. They choose to be a law unto themselves, but they appear to forget the obligations of position. To

live solely for amusement or excitement appears to be their sole idea of existence. An existence that denotes a total lack of responsibility, or those graver issues dependent upon the moral force of example.

But of all signs of social degeneration none is so evident as the manner in which high-born and apparently exclusive Society ladies have permitted themselves to be patronised by those who furnish Society news to a certain class of journals.

They figure in special columns under their "pet" names. Their jewels are appraised or catalogued; their personality criticised, sometimes in a very uncomplimentary fashion. When by any chance they are seen with that unfashionable appendage—a husband—the fact is always recorded as noteworthy. No doubt it is in these days of lax morality.

One asks, How do these things get into the papers? Do these "smart," well-bred folk really send their own notices of what they wear or do, or the special friend chosen as companion? Or are the fashionable restaurants and hotels haunted by spies and penny-a-liners in the sole interests of that vast and majestic Influence—the Press? If not, every great household must own a special contributor, or the ubiquitous journalist must buy or bribe information of what goes on behind as well as before the scenes!

PREFACE

If in the book I have prefaced by these remarks there seems anything too absurd or too evil for credence, I can only plead that the main facts are absolutely true. It is a poor excuse with which to garnish fiction, seeing that fiction is never so strange as truth.

My characters are not portraits, but types made familiar by a perusal of the Society journals whose columns they adorn, and the *piquante* scandals that the Law Courts have evolved, and fashionable clubs betrayed.

I merely introduce them as the exponents of a creed—now happily non-existent—the actors in a drama that was only—rehearsed !

“ RITA.”

SOCIETY OF TO-DAY

THERE is no doubt that Society as it exists in this year of His Majesty's Coronation is not a little rotten. It is the age of advertisement, of publicity, and of luxury; and luxury has always heralded the downfall of an empire.

Cardinal sins literally rage and ramp amongst the upper ten, who, by reason of great names and ancient lineage, ought to be better than the ordinary middle-class. As a matter of fact, they are a great deal worse. To be rich, smart, talked about—these are the aims of the majority of Society women of to-day. They breakfast in privacy (no woman of fashion being equal to the strain of meeting her husband in the cold, pitiless light of the breakfast-table), lunch, tea, and dine at various smart restaurants, not often in company of their liege lords; and their dress bills are so enormous that in most cases they are quietly settled by a friend—again not the liege lord.

With regard to their sham philanthropy . . . charitable Society functions are usually business-like schemes which enable the Smart Woman to have her portrait in a dozen papers,

together with an account of her frock, her energy, and her beauty, and her generosity, while the expenses are so enormous that much of the money taken over the counter of those elegant stalls presided over by ladies of high degree, is obviously diverted from the fund it seeks to help and frittered away in unnecessary expenses. . . . Over and above all this there are tales whispered of cash-boxes lost by careless stall-holders; and of money collected for bazaar funds, and parcels, which certainly has not been spent in the way intended.

It would be too sweeping an assertion to say all Society's philanthropy is false, but no doubt a very great deal of it is got up to interest and amuse women who live only for display, and whose idea of charity is to sit in exquisite gowns at charmingly decorated stalls and flirt outrageously with the male persuasion, whom they rob with an audacity worthy of an unmentionable but widely emulated sisterhood.

*Extract from a Society Journal,
March 23rd, 1902.*

SOULS

I

IN the lamplit drawing-room of a house in Pont Street some half-dozen people were holding teacups, and talking in soft, hushed voices about matters of no special importance to the world at large.

Occasionally they sipped their tea, or idly played with the George IV. teaspoons. Sometimes they gazed at one another with heads drooping to one side like pensive birds, and their eyes would meet with a curious consciousness of some mutual and secret comprehension of what was unutterable. They were all wonderful people in this group, and a great deal of what they thought was—unutterable. Therefore they had carefully cultivated a representative expression.

The group on the present occasion was composed of a marchioness, an actress, a Society beauty, and two men, who belonged to noted clubs and were in the right set. The hostess, whose "*intime*" it was, was a tall, slight woman with

a young face and old, tired eyes, and a rusty, well-dressed head. She was by name the Hon. Mrs. Vanderdecken, but everyone called her "Trottie." The Marchioness of Beaudesart and herself were great friends, and never troubled themselves about what the world in general said of their doings, but took their own way serenely, though with due regard to avoidance of scandal. They were members of a new and fashionable Cult which had been established for the benefit of an effete and worn-out society. A society weary of living life without an object, tired of the turmoil and fever of perpetual entertainments, and eager only for rest and peace and the mutual enjoyment of such poor pleasures as life had left them. One of these pleasures was the discovering of kindred souls; fellow-creatures alike in thought and feeling and desires. Persons sharing the same sentiments and opinions, and finding themselves mutually drawn together by an irresistible sympathy, were permitted to join this Cult under certain conditions.

The first and principal condition was the observance of strict secrecy with regard to its ritual. The rigid exclusion of all claimants likely to be critical, unfaithful, or injudicious. Age and sex were immaterial to membership, but the claims of secrecy were paramount.

That was one reason why it had so soon become talked about in Society. It had grown rich, and

flourished in spite of the judicious black-balling of millionaires from Chicago, or New York, or South Africa.

The Cult didn't want rich nobodies. It only cared for the highest and noblest things of Soul and Sense. It only cultivated the most wonderful emotions, and lived up to a standard of moral and unintelligible purity. It had branches in the highest centres of civilisation, such as Russia, Vienna, Paris. The personality of its founder was a deep mystery, but royal blood was whispered of as its baptismal fluid; and meetings, actions, and investures were all shrouded in a becoming and profound incognito.

In the dusk of this November day Mrs. Vanderdecken was proclaiming opinions, and being listened to with the delight usually accorded to her mode of expression. Mrs. Gideon Lee, the actress, who was a dark, weird person of unappreciated talent, seemed to hang enraptured on her words. The beauty, who was *petite* and ultra-stylish, with a wicked, impish face and dazzling blue eyes, took up her parable and said—

“But, Trottie, it's absurd to push a mind into any 'given direction.' To be quite original one must let oneself severely alone. The only guide to self-content is a mood. We have all agreed to that, haven't we?”

There was a faint murmuring assent. It ran

through the room like the sigh of a breeze with the rustle of skirts as an echo.

"And to control one's mood, or to copy that of another——"

She paused. "Oh, I forgot Rule XV. Yes, the mood of a kindred soul can be copied, or rather, it blends so entirely with its affianced affinity that it ceases to be a separate mood. We are unities in that phase of being."

"Quite so," said Mrs. Vanderdecken. "Thought should never be deliberate. The spontaneous expression of a desire, or emotion, lends them the importance of a new sensation, and what is the aim and pursuit of our society? A new sensation, in any shape or form. Isn't that so?"

"Undoubtedly," murmured her hearers.

"Of course, the search is one of great difficulty. Sensation comes to us in a variety of forms; physical, mental, actual or imaginary, and these forms are capable of endless variety. All that is needed is Freedom. Perfect, uncultured, unimpaired Freedom!"

The two men leaned forward and gazed at the speaker attentively. One was a Probationary Soul. The other had an established affinity.

"Will you not explain?" began the Probationer.

Mrs. Vanderdecken waved a white hand, and again arrested all attention.

"Explanations are banal," she said. "You

must grasp what you hear, and interpret it by the light of your own intellect. The preservation of individuality is our chief concern. In a world of copyists and plagiarists one should strive to be a little original."

"But there's nothing new under the sun," quoted Lady Beaudesart.

"Oh! I think there is," murmured the actress in a thin, fluty voice. "For instance, when I play a scene in my own manner, after my own method, I am clothing it, so to speak, with a perfectly novel garment, made and fitted by my own mind. Unless, therefore, I find a similar mind, capable of doing the same thing, I claim to be original."

"And that you will never find, dear Judith," murmured Mrs. Vanderdecken, with a fond glance at the weird face and oddly draped figure. "Never! I am sure of it! Not in this century, at all events."

"Perhaps not," said Mrs. Gideon Lee. "I have been called original by the Press."

"Oh, then *you're* all right," remarked one of the young men who had hitherto been silent. He was an earl's youngest son, and by way of being a literary genius. He had published a wonderful book in a *bizarre* binding designed by himself, and it had reached a circulation of one hundred copies. Report said he was engaged to a princess,

but he had not yet confirmed the *on dit* by a representative introduction.

Mrs. Vanderdecken rose suddenly and rattled one of the George IV. teaspoons. "I wish you would listen to me," she said. "I want to tell you of a discovery of mine. It would make quite a romance, Tony, dear, if you would only give your attention to working it out. In the wilds of a Hungarian forest some years ago I discovered a girl suddenly orphaned by an accident to both parents. A *real* Accident. I felt strongly interested in her hopeless situation, and finding she had only some distant relatives who didn't want her, I placed her at a school to be educated. At least, it wasn't a school—exactly."

She paused and exchanged a look with Mrs. Gideon Lee. The Society beauty, who had been listening to the conversation with an interest born of new acquaintanceship, leaned forward in her chair and whispered something to Lady Beaudesart.

"It was at my Free College," continued Mrs. Vanderdecken.

No one answered.

"I soon found she was not only developing into a rare genius," she hurried on, "but into a rare beauty, and I am going to introduce her to London in—both characters."

"Oh—h!" murmured the women, drawing

themselves up from a langu. into an alert attitude.

"She is bound to make a sensation," continued Mrs. Vanderdecken, "but I must impress upon you all that she is *not* to escape out of our circle of interests. We need such recruits. When you see her you will understand better what I mean. She ought to have been here half an hour ago, but——"

A footman opened the door on her words, with the gentleness of a well-bred servant. He announced evasively with a British accent a name that sounded like "Frowning Aber . . rd."

Mrs. Vanderdecken rose with eagerness and stretched out both hands to the advancing figure. A certain well-bred surprise showed in the faces of the circle. The girl was tall, almost to stateliness. She was not the German type they had expected. Not fair, or stout, or awkward. Picturesque expressed her style and dress, but the wild beauty of her large dark eyes, the vivid crimson of her mouth, the white, clear skin so satin-smooth and colourless, possessed a weird and wonderful charm. The whiteness looked almost unnatural set against the sheen of massed hair that coiled beneath her hat and half covered her ears.

"I am late, is it not?" she said, and the slight foreign accent lent a curious charm to

the deep contralto of her voice. "I was detained after my lesson."

"Let me introduce you to my friends," said Mrs. Vanderdecken, mentioning names with the rapidity of long practice. "Will you have tea? No? Well, sit down here beside me, and tell me how is the voice. These dreadful fogs! You must be careful."

The girl unloosed her white fox furs and threw them on to a chair.

"I am careful. *Natürlich!* It is horrible, though, this weather of yours. And also—this London."

"Well, we shall soon leave it behind," cooed Mrs. Vanderdecken. "I am only waiting for your *début*, you know, Zafa."

She turned to the others. "Fräulein Eberhardt, as I was about to tell you, has determined on appearing in the 'little season.' I think it so wise of her. We catch people on the wing, just up from country-house visits, doing town *en route* for winter resorts. There's a melancholy suggestive-ness in St. James's Hall, so I've engaged the small room at the Queen's."

"Oh, that's what we're to take tickets for," observed the Probationer. His eyes rested on the girl's face, with its strange mingling of storm and spirituality, fire and snow. Who was she? Why had Trottie sprung her on

them so suddenly? Certainly the girl was a striking personality, but——

His thoughts wandered into one of those locked chambers of his mind to which no affinitive Soul had yet secured the key. He left the striking personality outside the door for a moment, then returned to consciousness of her presence by hearing she was actually going to sing.

It seemed an innovation, and he was distressed. As a rule music, except of a purely inartistic kind, was not permitted in Mrs. Vanderdecken's rooms on her "day." The conceit and competence of the true artist were an offence to that large, vague idealism of which the Cult boasted. Lord "Chris," as his friends called him, had written songs for the Cult, and various members had sung them, but here was Trottie actually forcing a concert-hall *débutante* upon the distinguished notice of amateurs. He almost shuddered. True genius is apt to be remarkable, and anything remarkable was, to a true dilettante, as upsetting as a violent colour, or a street noise. However, he retired to the remotest corner of the room, and wondered whether his *balladina*, "The White, White Moth," might find a place in the new singer's programme.

Mrs. Vanderdecken ran over a prelude with feeble exactitude as to notes. The girl, who had been standing looking down at the piano, swung suddenly round as the introduction ceased, and with her hands clasped behind her back and

her wonderful face turned upwards, began to sing a weird Hungarian melody. The listless listeners stared and flushed and fidgeted as the wild, rich notes throbbed on the air. They had never heard anything quite like this in drawing-rooms. It seemed a memory of mountain and torrent, savage scenes and savage loves, and through all the savagery one note wailed on and on like the lament of a broken heart.

They held their breath to listen.

How strange, how weird, how passion-laden was the voice, and how the singer's face matched it! Where had she sprung from? She looked like a chieftainess of some foreign tribe, a queen of Zingaras, a wild gipsy sovereign, anything but a concert-singer about to make her *début* before an uninterested English audience!

The song ended with a laugh as wild and exultant as victory over pain—a laugh that made the blood tingle in the listeners' veins. The girl stood still for a moment, then her hands dropped. Her face took back its colourless repose, and with a languid bow in response to the applause, she seated herself once more.

Mrs. Vanderdecken twirled round on the music-stool. "What did I tell you? Isn't it wonderful?" she exclaimed, waving her hands as if introducing a performing freak. "And now having heard her, I'll explain the scheme of the concert."

She left the piano and dropped into a chair.

"Remember, it's to go no further. There's nothing so difficult as the discovery of something novel. Absolutely novel. But I flatter myself no concert has ever been given that will create such a sensation as this of Zara's. The idea came to me like an inspiration; it's simple, but deliciously quaint. I've always noticed that in a play an actress changes her dress for every act; at least, if she doesn't she's not playing a part of any importance."

Mrs. Gideon Lee murmured, "True."

"But at a concert," continued Mrs. Vanderdecken, "the singers wear the same dresses throughout. Now I have divided Zara's concert into two parts, and she will make an entire change of costume for the second! Think how surprised the audience will be; how they'll talk about it! I'm not going to tell you the scheme of dress or the scheme of the recital yet. It will be a recital, in a way, as Zara will be the only vocalist. But we may have a pianist also to fill up. They are always so useful, I think. Now—why, what is it, Chrissy?"

For Lord Chris had advanced, his face wearing a new and eager expression.

"It has come at last," he murmured. "At last!",

Mrs. Vanderdecken turned a little pale, and rose from her seat. "You don't mean to say——" she gasped.

But he was paying no attention to her. His

rapt eyes were fixed on the white face and scarlet lips of Zara Eberhardt.

Softly he approached her. "Child of genius," he murmured, "your spell is on me. The lightning flash of comprehension has knit our souls! My inspiration was born to the magic of your voice, and your voice shall give it form and life! To you I dedicate it. I lay my art upon the altar of your genius. You shall sing 'The White, White Moth'; and all the world will ring with your fame! Yours and mine! Let me repeat—yours and mine, twin soul of me as I feel you are!"

No one expressed any surprise at this outburst. The recognition of "souls" was a sacred thing, and might take place openly, or in secret. The girl herself was the only person who seemed at a loss to understand Lord Chrissy's meaning. Her large eyes surveyed him in wide, unabashed amazement!

She murmured, "*Ach so*," and glanced at her patroness as if seeking explanation.

Mrs. Vanderdecken was looking at Lord Chris. A visible tremor shook her frail figure, and a strange light shone in her tired eyes.

"How wonderful!" she said, and then seated herself by the tea-table, and murmured again, "How wonderful!"

The others rose and prepared to leave. They came to her one by one, each contributing a remark on the recent occurrence.

"She's a wonderful discovery, certainly," said Lady Beaudesart. "Of course, we'll see that the hall is filled, dear. Do you want Press people? I can manage *that*, you know. Perhaps just a few of the ladies' papers will do at present. I'm so glad it's evening. I've a delicious thing in grey chiffon and silver. *Good-bye*, dearest. Really, quite, *quite* wonderful!"

Mrs. Vanderdecken's heart swelled with pride. She had, of course, known it would be wonderful, but appreciation of one's own judgment is never unwelcome. The room was empty now, save for herself and Zara, and Lord Chris.

He was still standing beside the girl, gazing dreamily at her white skin and scarlet lips. Suddenly he put his hand in his pocket and drew out a small monogrammed notebook.

"I must seize my inspiration on the wing," he said. "Words, music, are all *here*."

He touched his forehead and moved towards the piano. Then he pulled forward the music-stool and sat down. His fingers attacked the keys, bringing out weird, untruthful harmonies. The girl rose impulsively and crossed to Mrs. Vanderdecken's side. That lady drew her in a low, deep chair, and settled the gold-coloured cushions behind her own head.

"Hush! don't speak," she said. "He will write the music now. It's very wonderful. He quite despaired of an idea."

She kept her hand on the girl's round warm arm, and glanced at her from time to time as the throes of composition attacked the amateur artist. Low and deep, then, gaining force and thrilled with the passion of success, the words and music blended in their strange wedding march.

The girl herself grew interested, and leant for-

"Oh, white, white moth !
Oh, pure, pure soul !
And the golden bars between,
And all of passion and woe the goal
To the days that might have been.
Oh, fluttering moth, wilt thou burn and die?
Oh soul, of my soul, the Queen.

"Hot is the Flame, O white, white moth !
And the scorch of my kiss is a fire,
And the seared dust in the candle burns
To the death of its own desire.
And Love has left us no part or pain,
Oh, white, white moth, but the candle flame !

"Oh, white, white moth ! Oh, pure, pure soul !
Ye are twain, yet one to me ;
And I burn with the flame
That has made us twain,
And I dwell where I would not be.
But the soul of the moth
Is the soul of my soul
For all Eternity." *

He ceased, and turned towards them.

"It came like a lightning flash ! A beautiful shimmering rainbow of harmonies ! A thing of white-cloud purity and pomegranate passion ! It is yours, O Wonder-Worker ! You must sing it

for me. Sing it now, in this its birth-ecstasy, while all the blind, deaf world lies beyond, unknowing of what might re-create its tired acrimonies!"

"Go, Zara," said Mrs. Vanderdecken, releasing her arm. "Lord Chris will teach you his song, and you must sing it at your concert."

The girl rose somewhat unwillingly, and moved towards the piano.

"I do not—have not—quite caught your melody, *mein Herr*," she said. "And the words . . . what are they?"

He handed her the notebook, and while she studied the scribbled inspiration he carefully played the setting.

"Not white, *white*," he corrected as she commenced.

"*Was?* Ach, so it is! I find the English so hard. You must excuse."

Again she tried, but the poem presented too many difficulties for a first reading.

"I will sing '*ah*' or '*do*,' as in the solfeggi, where I cannot say the words."

"Oh, you *must* sing the words!" exclaimed the composer. "They are everything. I will teach them to you slowly. They are full of subtle imagery, I know, but not technically difficult. Now, repeat after me—

"Oh, white, white moth!
Oh, pure, pure soul!"

Mrs. Vanderdecken rose softly and glided from the room by a door not patent to all observers. She was dining out at eight o'clock, and rest was imperative before the ordeal of preparation.

The two at the piano did not notice her departure. Both were engrossed in mastering the difficulties of the moth in its transit of folly.

"Say it to me, once; now, yourself," urged Lord Chris, leaning one elbow on the keys and laying his head on an upturned palm, "as if you were reciting. Your voice is wonderful. Almost thou persuadest me to be a German, though my soul abhors Wagner and all his works. But you have the pure untutored style. Ah! Cling to it, my child. Let the world acknowledge art is not a thing to be taught; not the cramping of free limbs, the fretting of wild pinions! Alone, apart, it stands; sufficient unto itself and perfect in its own conceits."

The girl looked at him with total lack of comprehension. She wondered if he was in possession of his right senses. The odd way he gazed at her, the strange smile on his lips, so mirthless yet so mirth-provoking, affected her in a curious and quite novel manner. He was wonderfully handsome, she acknowledged, but why did he talk so strangely? As for his music, it offended all known canons of art. Yet there was power in it and a weird beauty that caught the ear of the listener, and haunted the memory.

She had sung the melody without regard to wrong notation, or odd phrasing, and he had not corrected her. Evidently, therefore, he only considered the *sound*, not the, sense of the composition.

Over and over she murmured that first verse. Then, without warning, she retreated a few steps, and standing in her favourite attitude, burst into full voice. The accompaniment followed her with faulty harmonies, yet borrowing some of her own passion and landing her safely to a concluding bar.

"That is it, *nicht wahr?*" she exclaimed. "Ah, I find it now. I shall sing it, as Madame Vanderdecken say, at my concert."

"And I will accompany you," said Lord Chris, rising, and pushing back the hair from his damp brow. He extended his hands to the girl and she gave him hers. When he tried to draw her nearer she resisted.

"*Na, na.* It is not necessary."

"It is the custom of the Order!" he said.

"The Order?" she repeated. "*Was ist?* I know nothing of no Order."

"But you will," he said passionately. "You must. You have enthralled me, Zara, and through me you will belong to this great and wonderful community, all working for their own great interests, all seeking to achieve results that shall astonish Time and the World. Why do you look,

so strange, you wild child of the mountains? I am not going to harm you. Surely you feel what I feel for you? It cannot be that my soul appeals in vain to yours?"

"Soul," she muttered, as she stood and looked at his excited face. "I know nothing of any soul. I have not been taught. I have only learnt my music, my art, and to worship beauty in all things. What is it, then, to be a soul?"

For a moment he was silent. He felt as a hunter might, confronted suddenly by a wild and fearless creature of the woods, knowing it was at his mercy, yet baffled by its very ignorance of danger.

He gazed at her, while mechanically stroking his smooth golden hair into sleekness.

"What—is it?" he repeated, and again paused. Some things are so difficult to put into words. The baldness of mere explanation is so cruelly indelicate compared to the subtle delights of suggestion. And this girl was so strange, and those great wild eyes of hers seemed to search his inmost nature and yet hold him aloof and apart from her own. The novelty of the sensation fascinated him. She became a psychological study of deepest interest. Curiosity and the desire for new experience overmastered all other feeling. Sensuous imagination threw its light of false allurements around this wonderful child, and he felt he could fall at her feet and adore her.

But he made no attempt to answer her question. Vaguely he remembered having heard somewhere, in days far off—childhood, boyhood perhaps—of some great Hebrew judge confronted by a similar problem, and asking, "What is—Truth?" The same problem faced him in the present twentieth-century instance. "What is a Soul?"

The striking of the hour from a timepiece sounded startlingly loud on the silence, and awoke him to a memory of this long pause; this silent bar in the symphony of sensation.

"Pardon me," he said hurriedly. "I have been thinking, or rather I was following on the track of your question, and it led me into a weird and illogical wilderness. You are, of course, aware—but pray sit down. It will be a matter of some moments to explain, and I am keeping you standing."

"I hate to sit down," she said brusquely. "Go on with the explanation."

Again the difficulties attending crude facts pressed upon his artistic sensibilities.

"A soul," he began, "is the spirit of true consciousness—a something that ensures possession of inner faculties tending to a subtle appreciation of things unknown to the outside world. We are surrounded by crude, vulgar, almost indecent tragedies, played with more or less effect. This is called 'Life.' Once we can detach ourselves from the coarse realities of such

dramas, and retire into a subconscious trance of purely personal and artistic passion, we, so to say, also detach ourselves from the barbarous, vulgar world. We retire into a sanctuary of our own—a sanctuary that can only be shared by a soul twin to our own, that thinks as we think, believes as we believe, exalts as we exalt. The mysterious affinity between these kindred souls makes the true wedlock of material and immaterial life. No third person can interfere with it; no stupid human law divorce it. I, in fact, become my own law, and the soul I wed is one with the law. Sometimes we are passive, sometimes active agents. The elements of a purely personal but exquisitely beautiful life embroider our silent hours, and the weirdest and wildest of mysteries are sealed in our inner consciousness. We surround ourselves with impressions, and scorn to deduce rational facts from their obscurity. A sensation is priceless. We watch ourselves, and the spectacle of our wonderful possibilities is more enthralling than *Hedda Gabler*, more subtle than Henry Irving in *The Bells*. You look a query I am speaking vaguely. Perhaps you have never heard of Henry Irving."

"Never," said the girl.

"Or Ibsen? No? How truly exquisite you are! The tutored and well-informed mind of Modernity is as a desert compared to the superb blankness of your untaught simplicity. Ye

'wildbird' stamps you as a thing of forest and river; mountain solitudes, absolute fearlessness. And my soul would call you mate. Do you not hear its call?"

"No," she said brusquely. "Neither have you, *mein Herr*, told me yet by words what a soul is, except that it has no sense, no reasonability."

"You are cruel, my wonder child, or else your limited knowledge of the blunt English language seals your powers of comprehension."

"If . . . if it could be that you would speak a little more plainly," she suggested.

He laughed softly. "Plain speaking is like an ugly woman. We always want to get away from both. Believe me, my dear Fräulein Zara, the time has not yet come for such an unaccountable liberty on my part. I have answered your question to the best of my ability. When a day arrives for you to *feel* instead of to question, you will understand everything without words. Sensation and sympathy—the touchwood of inspiration—these will be your teachers, and I——"

The deep, wild eyes scanned his own again, and for a moment his cheek paled and the glib nonsense of his parrot tongue was checked by a force hitherto unknown.

"I," he murmured, "shall be at your feet, or you at—mine."

II

ZARA EBERHARDT came into Mrs. Vanderdecken's dressing-room, a few moments before the carriage was announced.

The maid was standing, holding her mistress's elaborate cloak and giving a last touch to the folds of a gown whose skirt emphasised slimness, and whose upper portion exaggerated any deficiency of feminine charms.

Mrs. Vanderdecken never allowed herself to look more than thirty in the evening, either in face or in figure, but she had not yet discovered an art by which the age of the eyes can be concealed. Therefore, to a certain extent, her years remained what they appeared in the crude light of day.

She turned caressingly to her *protégée*.

"Thou wilt dine in thine own study, dear one," she said in German. "And there are books and the music to study. I shall not be late. You will wait up for me?"

"Oh, *ja*, that is, of course," answered the girl. "It will not seem long. I must learn the new *ballade* of your friend the *Herrschaft*; I cannot say his name. He is a most strange young man."

"Do you think so?" said Mrs. Vanderdecken, turning her thin shoulders to be shrouded in the lace and fur that represented a cloak. "Ah, but then you know nothing of men at present, *meine Leibling*, except your teachers, and they were all old. After next week life will begin for you, and you will be able to form a better opinion of the sex. My friend of the *balladina* is a very popular young man in Society—most gifted; quite abnormally so."

"You call him—what is it?"

"Chrissy. His name really is Christopher Camelot, but in our set we always use nicknames. Now I must go. That's the hateful thing about dinners; no margin for unpunctuality. Take care of yourself, sweet. *Ich gehab Dich wohl!*"

She blew a kiss from her finger-tips, and floated away in a cloud of trailing lace and perfumed chiffon. Zara Eberhardt stood for a few moments in the luxurious apartment sacred to the art and vices of the toilet, and surveyed it curiously. It was still a place of wonder and loveliness to her. Delicious shades of pink, deepening here and there to rose-red, made up its scheme of colour. The great bed had hangings of satin and lace, and a coverlet to match. The dressing-table was covered with silver and cut-glass, and great white rugs carpeted the floor. Pine logs were burning in the grate, and the electric light flashed softly

from pale rose globes of many quaint shapes and devices. In the room opening out of this luxurious nest were wardrobes and dress-boxes containing extravagant toilettes, and dainty *lingerie*. Through open doors and unclosed lids gleamed satins and laces, costly furs, wonderful tea-gowns—all the necessary equipments of a fashionable woman, who spends thousands on her personal attire. As yet these things were all new and strange to Zara. She had only just arrived in London, and been kept in strict seclusion save for a daily outing in retired districts of the Park, or her visits to the Hungarian musician who was teaching her his national songs. The luxury and beauty of her present life appealed forcibly to a nature highly poetic and highly imaginative.

When at last she left the beautiful room and retired to her own part of the house, she seemed to carry some of its sensuous sorcery with her. She opened the piano and played softly the air of Lord Christopher's song. What strange things he had told her; what strange words were those he had written!

"The moth and the soul." Was it an allegory? The fluttering insect that beat wild wings against a luring flame, and the passionate soul, burning itself to death for sake of a vain love.

She had sung of love, read of love, thought of love, but an exquisite innocence surrounded her dreams as yet. All was vague, shadowy, unreal.

Some day, perhaps, she would know ; would realise for herself ; but she was not impatient for revelation. To expect was still so wonderful ; to *know* could never possess half that charm.

A footman brought her in her dinner, and she ate it mechanically, studying the score of a modern opera during its progress. Music was a passion with her. It filled her whole being to the exclusion of all other emotions. She was perfectly content with her evening and her own company, and half pitied her protectress, who must be weary of a long, stately meal, and the everlasting endeavour to say or hear some new thing.

But Mrs. Vanderdecken was not to be pitied on this occasion. She was, in fact, in the enviable position of enjoying a new sensation. Among those present she had specially noted a very handsome and very brilliant woman, between thirty and forty years of age, whose conversation had been witty enough to attract even Lord Christopher's attention.

At first Mrs. Vanderdecken put her down as a foreigner by reason of an unusual richness of accent, not common to English voices. When the ladies were yawning through that after-dinner "wait" which pays the absent man so high a compliment, she approached her hostess and inquired the name of the interesting stranger. Lady Beaudesart was rather given to bringing odd additions to the Cult, being a frivolous but very

fascinating person, with a runaway tongue and a passion for genius.

"Who is she?" she answered Mrs. Vanderdecken. "My dear, such a funny story! I've been dying to tell you. I was in at Jay's yesterday, buying gloves, and I had Omar Khayyâm with me—my black pug, you know. The dear treasure was sitting on a chair with his usual adorable patience, awaiting the conclusion of my purchase, when I heard a voice say, 'Oh, the dear, dear little soul!' I started. A woman was gazing adoringly at my pet. Our eyes met, 'Ah, you are one of us,' I said.

" 'I am,' she answered.

"We got into conversation immediately. She too had a treasure; *feline* though. A perfect Trattorian cat. Do you know what a Trattorian cat is, Trottie? No? Well, no more do I. But it doesn't do to acknowledge ignorance nowadays. I went with her to see the cat. It's a ~~dream~~! And then we had some tea, and then I asked her to dinner to-night to meet some more of us, and—and that's all."

"All!" echoed Mrs. Vanderdecken. "Quite enough, I imagine. Seriously, though, Adèle, do you mean to say you ask a woman to dine here, to meet us, about whom you know nothing? To whom you had no introduction?"

"But, Trottie, dearest, isn't one of our rules the search for a new sensation? Well, that's just

what she gave me. She's perfectly delicious. As for not being introduced, that didn't matter, because we all know someone who's the best introduction to her. She's George Murphy's aunt!"

Mrs. Vanderdecken turned as pale as rouge permitted. "Adèle, you must be mad! You know I never trusted that young man. I'm perfectly sure he's laughing at us all the time. At our very last meeting didn't he upset the whole business by asking the most ridiculous questions? And as if *one* Irish member isn't enough, you bring in another! I *thought* there was something familiar about that woman's voice. Brogue, of course."

"Oh no, dearest," pleaded Lady Beaudesart, "not brogue. Only the very faintest and most delicious of accents. And you'll be quite charmed with her once you know her. I assure you you will. Let me bring her to you now, before the men come in. Do."

"Very well," said Mrs. Vanderdecken resignedly. "I'll see what I think of her. But I'm perfectly certain she's not in the Order. You've been taken in. What did you say her name was?"

"I think it's O'Brady; or was it O'Connor? Anyhow, I always think of her as George Murphy's aunt. It's a pity he's not here to-night. But he had another engagement. All said and done, Trottie, you know he's the most absolutely charming boy that ever came out of that

dear, unhappy, misrepresented country. Dolly is madly in love with him, and as for Chris——”

Mrs. Vanderdecken moved restlessly amidst her billowy laces. “Dolly’s a little fool,” she said contemptuously. “She hasn’t a thought above cotillon-leading. Well, bring this woman to me, Adèle. I see you’re infatuated with her. It’s a pity the Chief’s away, because she would know about membership. However, I shall soon find out if she’s right.”

Adèle Beaudesart moved away in the direction of a group who were laughing in a quite unsoulful manner. She began to smile as she approached. Mirth is so very infectious. Then she stretched out her fan, and lightly tapped the ivory shoulder of the brilliant Mrs. Brady.

“I want to introduce you to a most particular friend of mine,” she said. “May I claim you for a moment?”

“Oh, certainly.” Her guest rose and nodded beamingly to the group. “I’ll come back to you presently,” she said, “and tell you another.”

Lady Beaudesart linked her arm in the beautifully moulded arm of her new friend, and swept her away.

• “Who is it?” whispered Mrs. Brady anxiously. “Also one of—Us?”

Adèle nodded. “Of course. She wants to put you through your paces, I think.”

Mrs. Brady stopped to pick up her handkerchief,

which had fallen to the ground. In doing so the skirt of her gown became entangled with the jet and sequin fringes of her companion's Paquin marvel. The process of disentangling without detriment to either skirt occupied an anxious moment.

"I'm only a recent convert," murmured Mrs. Brady, under cover of the clinking fringes. "So, of course, I've not learnt very much."

"Oh, that's of no consequence," answered Lady Beaudesart. "We're our own teachers, you know. Of course, as long as you've the password it's all right. By the way, did I tell you the one for to-night? Being my house this time, of course *my* pet shares the honours."

"Oh, Omar Khayyâm," said Mrs. Brady quickly.

"Yes. Take care, my dear, you'll tear your lace. Linerick, isn't it?"

"Yes; been in my family for generations," answered Mrs. Brady, with convenient forgetfulness of a Dublin firm as yet unpaid for the flounce. "What's this your friend's name is?" she continued.

"Mrs. Vanderdecken. Trottie, you know. Surely you've heard of Trottie?"

"Ra—ther," said Mrs. Brady emphatically. "She's a very wonderful person, isn't she?"

"Oh yes! Comes next to the Chief, you know. They were the two who started it."

"And—her pet?" inquired Mrs. Brady casually.

"A Moldavian poodle—very rare. He has a room of his own, and a special attendant, and such a wardrobe! My poor darling can't compete with it. Why even the handkerchiefs are made in Paris, and as for his travelling outfits, no prince could desire better than Eldorado's."

The dresses were disentangled now, and Mrs. Brady swept gracefully beside her friend to the low lounge where Mrs. Vanderdecken reclined, with cushions to suit her dress piled behind her beautifully dressed head. The eyes that looked so old, set in the delicate oval of a face of fresh tints and carefully massaged lines, gave one long, inquisitive gaze into the laughing blue of the Irish eyes that challenged them.

Then a languid hand extended itself, and Mrs. Brady's warm grasp gave generous promise of large and liberal soulfulness.

"I am so delighted, so honoured," she murmured.

Mrs. Vanderdecken swept her laces aside and made room beside herself.

"One of—Us, I hear," she said.

"—Oh yes! Heart—and soul!" murmured Mrs. Brady. "So truly wonderful! Such a marvellous idea! And carried out——"

"Yes. I flatter myself the scheme has been eminently successful," answered Mrs. Vanderdecken. "It was not easy. The idea that only

the initiates should have knowledge of each other—should be able to recognise each other under any circumstance, any disguise, any nationality. By the way, who is your sponsor?"

"My sponsor," faltered Mrs. Brady. "You won't be—shocked—I hope, if I confess." Her eyes fell bashfully.

"To a male one? Oh no! George, of course. I thought so directly I heard you were his aunt."

"Yes—George," said Mrs. Brady. "What a wonder he is! His speech in that awful case made quite a sensation."

Mrs. Vanderdecken's laces rose and fell with excitement at the welcome word.

"We know, of course. He is quite one of the notable men now. I only hope success won't spoil him. Odd that he *will* live in the Temple, and work so hard. He talks of Parliament as a career. I truly hope he will reconsider it. You must use your influence."

"You may depend upon it I shall," agreed Mrs. Brady heartily. "I have a great deal of—of influence with George."

"I wish you had brought him with you to-night," said Mrs. Vanderdecken. "But I suppose *you* don't live in the Temple?"

"I—oh no. I have a flat in Mount Street. My Irish property is, alas! sadly encumbered. No one knows what an Irish landowner has to put up with except, of course, an Irish landowner."

"But Adèle will be a friend to you, I'm sure," murmured Mrs. Vanderdecken. "She's so good at getting up bazaars and things for distressed people."

Mrs. Brady coloured to the roots of her dark hair. "Oh! it's not so bad as *that*," she said.

"I fancied—I mean Adèle gave me to understand—but then, she's so impulsive. Takes frantic likings to people one day and drops them in a week for someone else. Now I'm not like that. I'm staunch. Love means more to me than all the world beside!"

"How happy your husband must be!" murmured Mrs. Brady sympathetically.

"My—husband!"

If she had said, "My—footman," the word could hardly have been more eloquent of contempt.

"I have no husband. He died three years ago. I thought everyone knew *that*."

"Oh yes, of course. I beg your pardon. I'm confusing you with Adèle——"

"With Adèle?" Mrs. Vanderdecken raised herself on one slim elbow, and the tired eyes flashed ominously. "Why—she divorced *hers*!"

At the same moment the door opened, and the men sauntered in.

"The saints be praised!" thought Mrs. Brady.
"They'll save me!"

III

THE tail-coated, white-necktied contingent sauntered in; the light of the last-quaffed goblet in their glassy eyes, the mirth of the last salacious story lurking about clean-shaven lips. Lord Chris drifted towards Adèle, and his colleague, a tall, loose-limbed, very good-looking man, took a chair beside Mrs. Vanderdecken. He had taken Mrs. Brady into dinner, and she had managed to amuse him.

"I always wonder what women talk about—after dinner," he observed.

"We repay the compliment," said Mrs. Brady briskly. "Confession for confession, Mr. Warrender. If you will tell me what you gentlemen discuss over your wine, I'll give a hint of our confidences over the coffee-cups!"

Basil Warrender smiled faintly. "Which of us would—dare?"

"Ah, that speaks for your style of conversation. I should have no fear."

"Nor I," said he, "if our minds met on equal grounds."

"Perhaps they do," said Mrs. Brady. "The

sensation of deserved confidence is very pleasant."

He looked up quickly.

"A password and an invitation. Trottie, are you listening to this traitor in the camp? Do women really talk of harmless, innocent things? Have you no fears of self-betrayal?"

Mrs. Vanderdecken waved her large feather fan languidly.

"Am I to speak for myself, or others?"

"Oh, others! Who would be so imprudent as to ask a woman to tell the truth of herself?"

"We usually discuss the fine arts as concerned with coming or existing fashions, and abuse our husbands for meanness."

"And—if you have no husbands?"

"Our wonderful good fortune in being able to do what we please, and spend what we like."

"That sounds too innocent to be true," said Basil Warrender, who was a portrait painter of great fame, and much lionised by great ladies who desired posterity to admire them. "But it must be very pleasant to be able to spend what you like. No fear of a day of reckoning or anything of that sort. Days of reckoning only come to artists and Irish landowners, don't they, Mrs. Brady?"

"I can vouch for that," she said heartily. "At least, for the landowners. And it's not only our creditors we have to reckon with, Mr. Warrender,

but the tenants who *can* pay and won't; and the poor wretches that would, only they can't."

"I love the Irish," said Basil Warrender. "They're so deliciously illogical. That's why they make such fine lawyers!"

"Ah, well," said Mrs. Brady, "the English aren't behindhand in seeing two sides to a question, and deciding for a third that's nothing to do with the matter at all."

"You pay us a great compliment," he said. "And I wish you'd finish that story you began to tell me at dinner. Trottie, this will interest you, as you've a celebrated pet. Mrs. Brady's heroine had a pig that was all but human in intelligence."

Mrs. Vanderdecken turned eyes of languid interest on the laughing Irish face.

"A pig for a pet!" she murmured.

"It was old Lady Delaney who had it," announced Mrs. Brady. "She brought it up from the time it was a baby, and really it was quite a Christian pig, so knowing in its ways, and so particular about its food. It slept in a room of its own, Mrs. Vanderdecken, in a beautiful feather bed, with linen sheets and a quilt of silk, and pillows for all the world like a human creature would have. To see it asleep, with its head on the frilled pillow-case, was a sight to be remembered. And it would be sent for a walk in the park twice a day with a liveried servant to lead it. Oh, it was quite a gentlemanly pig,

and knew every one of the family. People for miles round used to call to see it, and the creature knew its bedtime as well as any Christian; and Lady Delaney would wash its face and put it into bed, and wish it good-night, and there it would lie till she called it in the morning. Trouble came, though, when it grew big and was too lazy to walk."

"What was the end of this interesting animal?" asked Basil Warrender.

"Oh, as far as I remember, I think some ill-natured person set the Cruelty to Animals Society on about it, and they insisted on its being restored to what they called its natural condition of life."

"Poor creature!" cried Mrs. Vanderdecken sympathetically. "I should have refused to part with it. Affection like that owns no law save to the object of its love. Fancy, if any impertinent official chose to visit me with respect to Eldorado."

"Eldorado is not quite so large as a pig," remarked Basil Warrender.

"Oh, I've heard he's a *dream*!" exclaimed Mrs. Brady. "The most adorable of poodles! You give tea-parties for him in the season, don't you, Mrs. Vanderdecken?"

"Yes—two. They're quite things of importance," said Mrs. Vanderdecken, with animation. "The Society papers notice them, and all the

Kennel Club people come. But this is a very singular story of yours, Mrs. Brady, about the pig. It seems such a weird choice of a pet, doesn't it?"

"Not to an Irish person," remarked Basil Warrender. "The use and intelligence of this Erinian commodity is quite beyond description."

"Oh," murmured Mrs. Vanderdecken vaguely, "then I suppose it only sounds odd because *we* are not accustomed to them—the pigs, I mean—in our houses. But then, I've never been in Ireland."

She rose. "I want to speak to Chrissy about our evening for the poor costers," she explained. "You know we're getting one up for Christmas. Perhaps you would help us, Mrs. Brady, if you do—anything?"

"Oh, I should be delighted," announced that lady, wondering what she was expected to do, and whether this Cult spent their energies in good works, as well as in the maintenance of uncanny and expensive pets.

Basil Warrender leant back in his chair and surveyed her with an amused twinkle in his eyes.

"This is a little bit new to you, I expect," he said. "Don't think I've met you at any of these gatherings before."

"Perhaps you do not attend all," she answered, desirous of non-committal.

"Indeed I don't. Do you know I have been

wondering for the last five minutes if I might ask you something?"

"You seem fond of questions. Curiosity is not solely an Irish prerogative."

"You are so—stimulating. What I wished to ask was your ideas on affinity. It enters largely into the rules of the *vie intime*."

"But it is also a question of time, and natural selection?"

"I have known it to be a question of—unnatural selection."

There was something so odd and marked in his tone that she looked inquiringly at his face, but read nothing.

"Meeting you among these people implies a right to speak plainly—without offence," he continued. "You need not pretend to be more than an onlooker. I can read you, I think. With regard to the affinity, let me hope your affections will run in a healthier groove than that of most of these women. The craze for something abnormal in society is trenching on the playground of vice. I wonder where it will end."

The flag of confusion hoisted by the brilliant scarlet of her face somewhat surprised him.

"Have I offended you?" he asked.

"Not at all, not at all," she said quickly.

"But why do you criticise others while you yourself are sharing in the same sort of life?"

"Why? . . . Oh, because I too am only a

looker-on. They run after me, these people, because no one can paint their portraits quite so much to their taste. That is to say, I reach a standard of excellence that flatters vanity, and falsifies art."

"It pays, I suppose."

"As you say, my dear lady, it pays. And since life is thrust upon us without our consent, we have to purchase our own compensations with such coin as Fortune grants us."

"Coin spent here," she said, glancing slowly round at a talkative circle of which Adèle Beaudesart was the centre—"must mean a fair amount of compensation."

"So it does. It permits me to live in a Sloane Street studio, and afford myself various indulgences. In return I paint portraits: they are failures from an artistic standpoint, but they procure me very good dinners."

"And you are not one of—them?" she asked hesitatingly.

"No. And if I am any judge of character, no more are you."

"But do they believe you are one of their Order, Cult, whatever they call it?" she asked, evading a direct answer to that suggested query.

"Oh yes, of course, and they think I'm only awaiting the advent of one particular person with whom I can start life on terms that are poetically '*intime*.' It's a word capable of elastic meaning."

I hardly fancy that day will ever come. Personally I am in no hurry to greet its arrival."

"But they are not altogether frivolous; they do some good?"

"Oh, they are wonderfully charitable. But then, they dearly love to show themselves off. Art is a word for ever on their lips, but its real meaning is unknown. There's Lord Chris, for instance. He is by way of being a musical genius. Heaven save us! Such music and such verses! There's that young fool Tony Chevenix, who wrote a book on a social scandal and got it up to a second edition of one hundred copies! Well, he talks literature now as if he had grounded in Fleet Street, and stormed Paternoster Row. He's an erratic soul. His people have a nice place in the country, and their Saturday-to-Mondays are famous. I went once. Tony came in to dinner among some twenty people, in full evening dress—woman's evening dress! And no one seemed to mind."

Mrs. Brady turned quick, surprised eyes on the speaker.

"Only a freak, of course," continued Basil Warrender calmly. "These dear people are subject to them. Being a law to oneself seems to purify both actions and conscience. All is excused to a 'Sensation,' as you know!"

"Oh yes. I know that. It is one of the first

doctrines. Sensations are to the Cult what actions are to Life. Both build up a story, or—a fate."

"We shall agree well, I think," said Basil Warrender, with a welcoming smile that lent new meaning to his face. "But since you are launched on these strange waters, let me remind you of shoals and currents, quicksands and—shipwrecks."

He rose, and she did the same. She had no intention of staying too long in this novel territory whither she had drifted.

The group who had been discussing the costers' evening very enthusiastically, parted, and broke into brilliant fragments as she approached. Lord Chrissy addressed her abruptly.

"You'll recite, won't you?" he said. "Trottie says you've promised. I'm going to write a coster story for them; something *à la* Chevalier, but more real, more weird, more true to life than anything he has done."

"But surely you don't know anything about the nature and habits of costers!" exclaimed Mrs. Brady.

"Oh, I shall go down into their depths for my research," he answered. "A true artist is always ready to make sacrifices. Ah, Basil, you smile! Yet you, even you who have achieved the vulgarity of Fame, you have had to make—sacrifices."

"I certainly have; but they don't seem much in your line, Chrissy."

Lord Chris allowed a melancholy light to steal into his eyes. He was in a softened mood—the after-effects of the “Moth and the Soul” composition.

“How the world misjudges us!” he murmured. “Occasionally I have a mad hunger for sacrifice—a desire to lay myself down on some altar of self-immolation.”

“Oh, then,” said Basil Warrender coolly, “I should certainly pay a visit to the cöster in his natural *habitat*. He will probably offer you an altar.”

“And appease the hunger for self-sacrifice,” said Mrs. Brady.

“Who’s talking of hunger?” exclaimed Adèle, turning swiftly towards the speakers. “Didn’t you have enough dinner, Chris? Have some devilled bones before you go home. I’ll order them into the dining-room. We’ll all have devilled bones, shall we? It sounds so deliciously dissipated!”

“No, thanks, Adèle, not for me,” said Mrs. Vanderdecken languidly. “I always take boverine, in my dressing-room the last thing. I can’t afford to spoil its flavour, or I shouldn’t sleep all night.”

“And I’m going to see the dawn break over Whitechapel,” murmured Lord Chris, smoothing his hair mechanically. “I don’t think devilled bones are quite the right preparation for that.”

“Try a simple steak and a glass of stout as

a change, Chris," suggested Basil Warrender. "You'll find them very sustaining. By the way, what's the date of this affair?"

"Christmas Eve, the twenty-fourth of next month, you know," said Lady Beaudesart. "You'd better make a note of it, Basil. You've such a memory for forgetting things. I made three appointments with you, and you were out each time, or engaged, or something."

"I beg your pardon. You kept me waiting on each occasion, and came on wrong days."

"Oh, did I? Well, what with pedicure and manicure, and one's massage day, and dressmakers, and the hundred-and-two things one wants to do and see, the days aren't half long enough."

"Why not turn two days into one, and only go to bed every second night?" suggested Lord Chris.

"I've done that before now," interpolated Mrs. Brady, "but that was in Ireland, card-playing. We'd begin at night and go on all next day and next night, and imagine 'twas one evening. That's the way to enjoy a game!"

"Ah, now I understand why Irish landowners have to come to England," observed Basil Warrender.

IV

“MY dear aunt, what brings you here? At such an hour! Have you had breakfast?”

“My dear George, and why didn't you come to me last night after I telegraphed and all? No, I've not had breakfast—at least, a cup of tea doesn't count. You lazy young divil, you! Ten o'clock, and only just out of bed! How d'ye get through your work at all, George?”

“Oh, much as you get through life, aunt. By luck and the mercy of Providence. Now what's brought you here? Don't try to borrow money, for I'm in debt all round and don't know where my dinner is to come from.”

“Faith, then, George, it's you are the fool. For anyone knows you needn't trouble your head about a dinner or anything else. There's half Society at your feet at this present moment, and you not condescending to pick up the handkerchief! What are you about, wasting your opportunities? Why weren't you at Lady Beadesart's last night? Such a charming woman, and so pretty too! And everyone there asking about you.”

"May I inquire, Aunt Perenna, how did *you* manage to get to Lady Beaudesart's?"

"Oh, we made friends casually in at Jay's shop. She seemed to take a fancy to me, and asked me to dinner. And I met some very smart people there, George, and that's what made me so mad that you wouldn't come, for Adèle Beaudesart begged me to bring you—and someone there—Dolly Lauderdale, they called her—was quite 'down' because you didn't appear."

"She—was my reason for not doing so. I hate that woman."

Mrs. Brady's brilliant eyes opened to their widest possibilities.

"But how foolish! She's pretty and rich, and could help you so much."

"There's some help one is better without, and I'm not fond of suing for women's favours," said the young barrister coolly. "But let me give you some coffee, and I think those grilled kidneys are pretty decent. And now tell me what brought you over to London at this time of year."

"The truth, George?"

"Of course. We've always been honest with one another."

"Then it was about you. You hadn't written, and I grew anxious. I heard a rumour that troubled me."

He looked up quickly, but said nothing.

"I've often wanted a try at 'the little season,'"

she went on. "They say it's more amusing and a quarter the expense of the big one. I knew June and July wouldn't see me this year, and I heard of a furnished flat, a bargain, for two months. So here I am."

"But about Lady Beaudesart. Do you mean to say I knew nothing about you when you made acquaintance in Jay's shop?"

"Nothing whatever. I bore my own credentials in my own person. It was her dog that really introduced us. And one thing led to another. She belongs to some curious secret society, and she fancied I belonged to it too."

"Very curious and very secret," said her nephew dryly.

"Well, that's how it began. And last night I was introduced to a sort of high priestess of them all—the Honourable Mrs. Vanderdecken. You know her; she said so. In fact, they all welcomed me with open arms when I said you were my nephew."

"Do you know anything of Lady Beaudesart's history?"

"No. I thought she had a husband. In fact, I rather put my foot into it with husbands. Mrs. Vanderdecken had none, and Adèle Beaudesart was divorced."

"No. She divorced hers. It was a shocking case. Heard *in camera*. Before it was concluded the husband died. It saved her name and her

settlements. But I think it had a disastrous effect upon her character. She does the most reckless things of any woman in London."

"She is very beautiful, and seems very kind-hearted."

"How astonished she would be to hear any one credit her with such *bourgeois* virtues! The ambition of her set is to appear entirely wicked."

"But if they're *not* so bad as they appear?"

"That may be accounted unto them a virtue, but they would prefer it was not generally known."

"Do tell me more about them. Who is Lord Chrissy, and the writing young man, Tony Chevenix, with the girlish face? Did you hear about his dressing up as a woman at their country house? Evening dress, too, and coming in to dinner! Mr. Warrender, the portrait painter, told me. Is it really true, George? Do these people do such things?"

"They do even stranger and more unaccountable things," he answered. "Perhaps, therefore, I ought not to be surprised at their taking you up, Aunt Perenna."

"That's not very polite, George, and considering what a good friend I've been to you——"

"I know, aunt, I know. Don't think me ungrateful. But I want to warn you. You've plunged direct into the vortex of a society of which you know absolutely nothing. Plunged, I've no doubt, in a spirit of your usual wild adven-

ture ! But I ask myself, 'Where will it land you?' It's not only a question of money, of being able to keep up a reckless swim on a sea of wild extravagance, but it's a question of—well, to be plain—of morality."

She laughed gaily. "My dear boy, have I knocked about the world for nearly forty years without learning some truths of its goings on? Faith, George, it's not morals or the want of them that would frighten me. And as for extravagance, well, that's in our blood, and the only thing we want is the means of carrying it out. If it's sensation and novelty these people are crazy for, I'd not be behind any one of them in invention. Only——"

"Ah, it's that 'only'!" he said, rising and pushing aside his plate. "What can one do nowadays without money?"

He began to pace the room with quick, impatient strides. "What can one *be*, what can one *do*, on wholly inadequate means? Do you think I've no higher ambition than to be the puppet of these fools who rule Society, talking their jargon, and aping their senseless tricks? I simply court humiliation at every turn, though I'm too proud to let a living soul know it except yourself."

"My dear boy——"

"Oh, nonsense, aunt! Listen to me for a moment. I've had to swallow a bitter pill, and it's some relief to be able to complain of its—un-

pleasantness. I got into this set through Lord Christopher Camelot. He—well, he professed an immense admiration for what he called my brilliant abilities, and threw splendid chances in my way. You know what my aspirations were. To get into Society, to represent Parliament, to perhaps reach even the woolsack and a title. Nothing seemed impossible till—till I tried it. It's the long waiting, the hateful, monotonous *grind*, that take the life out of a man. If I was a plodder—but I'm not. I wanted to achieve success rapidly, and to do that I used every means that came in my way. I—thought—I was using Lord Chris——”

“Well, George?”

The brilliant face looked a trifle grave. Mrs. Brady adored her handsome nephew, and dreaded above all things to hear of failure, of trouble, of anything materially affecting the career she had mapped out for him.

“It's not well,” he said gloomily. “I'm deeply in debt; in *his* debt. And sometimes I think he's not exactly a nice sort of creditor. A case of compound interest, my dear aunt, with a vengeance! Oh, Money, Money, Money! What a curse and tyrant you are! Fancy, slaving as I do, and then trying to make every sovereign represent five! A good social position, and no means to keep it up! That's what ails me, Aunt Perenna.”

“And me, George!” she echoed pathetically.

"Exactly, and that's why I'm so sorry to hear you've got mixed up with these people. Be sure of one thing—they want something out of you, or they'd never take you up. Tell me, is Lady Beaudesart very—friendly?"

"Extraordinarily so; but if you know her, you know her pretty flighty ways, that caressing manner."

"Oh yes! Every woman is 'dearest' and every man 'my dear.' One is used to that. But does she seem inclined to take you up—seriously?"

"I think so. I had a letter this morning asking me to lunch, and I only dined there last night. They're getting up some entertainment for the poor at the East End. I never *have* recited in my life, but I suppose I could do it. They really seem very charitable, George."

"Theirs is the charity that covers a multitude of—other sins," he said. "And you will note that it is always attended with a good deal of blowing of trumpets and personal advertisement. In a way they are a power socially and financially, and can afford to do a little good to their less fortunate fellows. But there, what's the use of talking? You're no fool, Aunt Perenna. No more, I hope, am I. The simplicity of guile must be our weapons if we are going to fight with these beguiling *mondaines*. As for the sinews of warfare——"

"I thought you were making a good income now, George?"

"My dear aunt! A barrister's income can only buy him a crust when he has no teeth left to eat it! Sometimes I wish I hadn't chosen a profession. Finance is the thing. Everything nowadays is subordinate to the great power of money. It is supreme. It rules Court and Society, and art and war, and even religion. What pays best, rules best. Governments rise and fall at the bidding of wealth. War nowadays is more a question of supplies than military ability. It's the same with science and art. Nothing can be achieved without wealth, and nothing can withstand its all-reaching power. What are my paltry hundreds, what are even your thousands, measured by a millionaire's standard? You have to spend half your time in Ireland to make a splash for a little season in London! And I—I can't afford two dress suits a year!"

"It's very hard, I know," sighed Mrs. Brady. "But we've weathered the storm so long, George, that we mustn't lose heart now. Among these people you might pick up an heiress."

"Thank you; no!" he interrupted scornfully. "I've not fallen quite low enough for *that*. I've not sold my conscience, and I'm not going to sell myself. Reckless I know I am, and small wonder,

considering the blood in my veins, but I'll not tread the byways of vice to oblige—anybody."

"Faith, George, my boy, that's nobly spoken, and I'm proud of you. Still, grand sentiments don't help your present position. And—financially, it's a bad one."

"It's about as bad as it can be," he laughed. For he saw that the brilliant eyes had grown misty, and he preferred to keep sentiment at bay. "But that's the surest sign things are going to mend, Aunt Perenna. So cheer up. You've made your little venture, and, by Jove, I'll see you through if I can. It wouldn't be bad fun if we fooled these fools to the top of their bent, and then let them know *why* we had done it."

"Ah, but we mustn't make enemies, George," she pleaded. "We can't afford that luxury. You spoke of the power of money. Add to that the power of social position. It makes one feel rather helpless."

"Where's your Irish spirit, Aunt Per? The very difficulties of the contest should make it the more exhilarating."

"Oh, I'm not afraid. I've nothing to lose. But you, George——"

"Bedad, I think I've less," he said, with a laugh.

V

MRS. VANDERDECKEN had got out of her dinner-gown, and was wrapped in an exquisite garment of wadded satin trimmed with snowy fur. She lay languidly stretched before the fire on a pile of rugs and cushions, and she sipped boverine from a cup of Coalport china.

She was not the tigress type of woman described by Zola; the woman of tawny, gold-hued hair, and supple limbs, and moods alternating between fierce abandonment and indolent satiety. But she would like to have been, and in occasional moments of sensuous aberration she imagined she was.

On the other side of the fire, half crouched on a fender-stool, sat Zara Eberhardt. She wore a loose crimson gown, the colour of her full, rich lips; and all the wonderful wealth of her auburn hair wrapped her like a mantle.

She leant one smooth satin cheek on an upturned palm; her great eyes were fixed moodily on the glowing logs. Mrs. Vanderdecken had been lecturing her, and she did not take kindly to lectures. Strength, liberty, independence,

these were in her blood and in her soul. She had been hearing things which threatened their continuance; which from some vague distance stretched out a shadowy hand of claim. And the claim wore the fetters of bondage.

"You told me my voice would make me famous," she said. "That I should be able to make much money, achieve my own living. Now you will not permit that I accept the advice of this *Concert-Direktor*."

"Certainly not," purred Mrs. Vanderdecken. "You had no business to enter into this discussion at all with him. I cannot give you to the world, Zara; at least not—yet. I only wish to show you, so that its curiosity may be whetted. It is so beautiful to expect; so hateful to realise what has been expected. You either fall short, and people say nasty things, or you go far beyond their imaginative capacity. In either case you are never the same again."

"But I came here, to this great ugly foggy city, to be heard; otherwise I would not have exchanged my wild life of woods and mountains for anything it can offer."

"That's because you are so sweetly ignorant of life. This great ugly city, as you call it, Zara, is only the casket of a precious and wonderful jewel. No one is in absolute possession of this jewel, any more than the King or Queen of the

country is in absolute possession of the Royal Crown. But they know it exists; it is there. They can gaze at its beauty, catch the rays that flash and sparkle from its magnificent jewels. Our crown is Pleasure, and its ugly casket only enhances the superb beauty and brilliance of what it holds."

"I . . . Oh, this talk, this talk!" The girl shook back her heavy hair with an impatient gesture. "It is all so strange. *Ich kan nicht verstehen!*"

"You will—some day," cooed Mrs. Vanderdecken in her fluty accents. "Do not hurry the time, Zara. One can only be young once, and a woman's youth is the briefest of all beautiful things. The shen of your hair, the red of your lips, the light in your wonderful eyes, all these will fade or pass, or be badly imitated. Now they are treasures of incalculable value. Do you think your genius would matter if you were not beautiful? Not a bit. No one would give you a second thought. Ungifted loveliness is a thousand times more valuable than genius without physical charm. But to possess both—the gift of beauty and the gift of genius—is to touch the very acme of possible success!"

She finished the boverine, and placed the cup on a small inlaid table.

"There have been many marvellous people in"

the world, people who have taken it by storm; but I think no one quite so marvellous as you, Zara. For your intellect has been left untrained, your soul unawakened, and only your genius cultivated. I should have feared the success of my experiment had you not been so wonderfully beautiful, and so absolutely cold-hearted. The only thing I fear is that impulsive temperament of yours."

"*Was ist? Impulsive!*" she laughed ironically. "Ah, ja, I am so. I am not quite of wood and stone. I *can* feel. I know what I want too! If what you call my beauty cannot get it for me, or my voice——"

She paused, and meeting the odd glitter in her protectress's eyes, remained perfectly motionless, as if trying to read their meaning.

"No matter," she muttered to herself, "I must find my own way to what I want."

"But, *meine Liebling*, what is it thou dost want?" murmured Mrs. Vanderdecken caressingly. "Nothing that I can give, or do? Surely you know that!"

The girl made no reply.

"Are you not happy, Zara? Is life, as it is, not enough for you?"

"No," came the brusque answer.

"Well, be patient but a little while, and you shall have your desire."

The girl rose to her feet and pushed the splendid fleece of hair from her brows, while her eyes glowed like a flame in the whiteness of her face.

Then she began to walk to and fro the room, her hands busily plaiting the luxuriant tresses into two great strands.

"If a man saw her—now," thought the woman watching her. And the blood flushed her cheek at the thought, and something cruel, evil, malicious, flashed into her eyes. "But none shall, if I can help it."

Suddenly the girl came to a dead stop, and faced her protectress.

"Tell me, madame," she said, "what is it to have a soul?"

Mrs. Vanderdecken's eyes wandered to the flashing diamonds that circled her fingers. She lay very still for a moment.

"Why do you ask? . . . What have you heard?"

"Oh, I could not of course comprehend all. Some of your friends talk so strangely. But one, the young *Herrschaften* whose *lied* I sing, he spoke of your '*Verein*.' What is it, then, you are named?"

"Certainly not a '*Verein*,'" purred Mrs. Vanderdecken, "and it is early days for you to have heard anything of us, of it. So that's what

Chrissy was talking about. I hope he did not make love to you."

"Make—love?" echoed Zara slowly.

"Oh, child, you can't be quite so innocent! Even in your solitudes the voice of nature occasionally made itself heard. Love is the speech of sex. A language born of youth and beauty and mutual attraction. You will hear it very soon, and very often, I'm afraid, Zara; but you must not attend. You must not believe. Let who will adore your beauty, but do not yield anything so priceless to the coarse homage of those adorers. Love is only beautiful as long as it is a fancy, a poem, a dream of senses still locked in a secret chamber of illusions. If that slumber is broken, its charm is for ever gone."

"Beauty. . . . You never speak of anything else. But I—the something that is *here*—want to live, want to feel, want to know."

She pressed her hands to her heart as she stood gazing down at the recumbent figure among the cushions.

"Do you—want so much, Zara?" asked Mrs. Vanderdecken. "And, but the other day you were a child; a wild, fleet-footed thing, caring only for your woods and waters. Must you too tread the same path I have trodden; learn the same lessons, suffer the same cruel pangs of disillusion?"

Her voice had an infinite sadness. Mrs. Vanderdecken never felt so sorry for anyone as she felt for herself, and the sorrow took an added note of pathos at night when she had to face an ordeal that spoke of the cruelty of Time, and the rivalry of other women.

"But you are happy, *nicht wahr?* You have so much, such a beautiful life, so many friends. You can go here, go there. See, act, do all as you please!"

"I can do all these things, as you say, Zara, and need ask no one's leave, and fear no one's criticism. But still I am not happy. I have never even come within an appreciable distance of an hour's perfect enjoyment. My nature is too horribly critical for mere everyday content with life. I have sounded its depths, learnt its mysteries, tasted its most subtle poisons, and their antidote—yet I have failed to find what I sought. I only know that I have outlived all I most desired, and have realised all I never expected. I seek sensation to keep life alive within me. But I don't seek it now as a personal excitement. I look at it through the eyes of—others; and the thrill of wonder or ecstasy that touches my heart is borne on an electric current of sympathy for and with—others."

She had spoken in her rapid and ungrammatical German, and the girl listened with that bewildered

sense of noncomprehension which delighted her preceptress.

"For instance," she went on, "life became very much more interesting after I met you. And I have brought you here that I may re-live some of my old triumphs, my old delights. I too have had a brief hour of fame, Zara, and I was beautiful—once."

"You are beautiful still," said the girl simply.

"Ah, dear one, that is so sweet of you to say. But, alas! it is not the beauty of pure, unadulterated youth. There are no more exquisite hours in store for me. For you there is—everything."

"But you always say—'not yet.'"

Mrs. Vanderdecken's pale lips took upon them an enigmatical smile.

"Wait till after your concert. Wait till you have tasted the first sweetness of success. Wait till men's eyes speak love to you and women's lips breathe envious praise. Wait till curiosity is rife and your name is on all lips. And even that will only be the prelude. For just as sensation is at fever height you shall disappear. No meteor flight brighter, or so short-lived. This is the preparation for that grand *début* I have promised. First excite curiosity by a promise; then astonish it with a denial. I venture to predict you will do all this, Zara, and I—I shall have been your discoverer. That will content me."

"You have been all, everything, to me!" cried the girl, throwing herself beside the reclining figure. "Never can I thank you enough, never love you enough! I am not ungrateful, even though I do seem dissatisfied. You bade me always to tell you my thoughts, my feelings! And so I do."

The tired, worldly eyes gazed somewhat wistfully at the lovely face.

"How long will you continue that, Zara? Is it any wonder I hold you back just a little longer? That I say—'not yet'? When I give you to the world I lose you for myself. You are so wonderful, it cannot but adore you. Why should I do this?"

She lifted herself suddenly on her elbow, and her face grew strangely pale. The girl drew back as if startled by that pallor and the expression in the strange eyes.

"You must," she said. "You promised. I have had enough of shadows. I want reality. I want to live—to *know*."

She sprang to her feet. Her frame quivered with excitement.

Mrs. Vanderdecken smiled again. "Daughter of Eve," she murmured. "So you too have looked at the Forbidden Fruit. Ah! Eden lasts no longer for a woman than that look. How should you escape either the Serpent, or the Flaming Sword? Did I? Does any woman?"

Well, thank me, or curse me as you will, Zara, at least I'll set no guards at the gate of your ignorance. Go forth! Learn what life is. But remember, the death of illusion is sure, and your days of peace are numbered!"

The shams and hypocrisies of her usual mode of speech fell from her as she spoke those words. What she saw in the girl's face taught her that even her life of the world and its wickedness had not quite killed regret for what might have been; what never could be—now.

VI

MRS. BRADY lunched with Adèle Beaudesart, and they talked "pets" and scandals with an intermixture of vivacious nonsense. Lady Beaudesart was not by way of taking herself seriously, and affected to be ridiculous, chiefly because it was more amusing than being sensible.

She thought Mrs. Brady great fun, and her stories of Irish Society delighted her. It was so wonderful to hear that there was such an institution, and that it had its wicked as well as its civilised side. Lady Beaudesart had taken pleasure trips to all parts of the world, including Vancouver Island, but the idea of visiting any country so adjacent and so unfashionable as Ireland had never entered her head.

After much manœuvring Mrs. Brady came to the conclusion that Lady Beaudesart was scarcely better informed regarding the new Cult than herself. As far as she could ascertain, the whole duty of the Order consisted in pleasing oneself individually, and animating another kindred spirit to assist in the movement. No outside criticism was permitted to interfere with any consequent

vagaries. If it attempted to do so, it was strictly ignored. Certain people who had a blunt way of stating facts were severely avoided, unless they happened to be extraordinarily rich. Vagaries are sometimes expensive, and then they must be paid for by—somebody.

“However rich one is, one never seems to have enough money,” lamented Lady Beaudesart, as they sipped their coffee over the fire in her boudoir.

Outside the day was dull and foggy and cold. Here all was warmth and luxury. She had countermanded the carriage, and kept Mrs. Brady on for confidences.

“Indeed that’s true,” sighed the handsome Irishwoman. “Everything costs so much nowadays.”

“And most of the rich people—the *really* rich, you know—are so horrid. One would rather not know them, but one has to. That’s why it is so pleasant to think one has a—retiring-room, so to speak. Some place shut off from the horrors who think themselves the pillars of Society. We let the world into our reception-rooms, but not into our boudoirs.”

“I—am greatly honoured,” murmured Mrs. Brady, looking round the dainty satin-hung nest, and wondering why Adèle was so nice to her.

“Oh, I liked you the moment I set eyes on you,” continued the pretty *mondaine*. “By the

"way, what's your name? It's so stupid going on at 'Mrs.' and 'Lady'; call me Adèle. What shall I call you?"

"Perepna is my name. 'Per' I'm generally called. George always——"

"Ah, George! That dear boy! I wish he wasn't so hard to get at, though. Chrissy says it's because he doesn't like women, but I don't believe that."

"Indeed, he'd be no true Irishman if that was so!" exclaimed Mrs. Brady. "But he's very proud, you know. Besides, he wants to make a career for himself, and if he was to become a mere Society hanger-on, he couldn't do that."

"I suppose not," said Lady Beaudesart vaguely, as she caressed her little dog's ears. "Though I don't know why he should work so hard. There are always people to float one nowadays. And he's so handsome."

Mrs. Brady felt more puzzled than she looked.

"There's Basil Warrender," continued Adèle. "Why, he was as poor as a church mouse till Dolly Lauderdale took him up, and boomed him everywhere. And she's got millions! She'd do the same for George, I'm sure, but he rather avoids her. Why don't you give him a hint, my dear?"

"I certainly will," agreed Mrs. Brady, wondering why George had said he disliked this would-be benefactress so heartily.

"I wonder has he seen Trottie's new wonder," continued Adèle Beaudesart—"this singing girl. I must say she is lovely enough and *bizarre* enough to create a ripple in the stagnant waters of the London musical world. I never consider English people really musical. Do you? They're so groovy too. Same old Monday Pops programme year after year, and same silly ballad things at St. James's Hall season after season. I loathe them. Same old singers, same old songs, same old operas. With all Germany, Russia, and Italy to choose from, we are treated to *Trovatore* and *Lucia di Lammermoor* as the opening treats of the season! By the way, I've discovered a pianist. Such a *dretum*! I want Trottie to let him play at this concert she's getting up. But she's so horribly selfish, I couldn't get her to promise. I wish he'd take it into his head to drop in this afternoon. I let him have the run of the house, and he haunts the music-room sometimes for days together, and then won't come near me for weeks. To hear him play Chopin! . . . Well, it's a revelation! Neither of the great 'P's' can touch him. Have you seen this Hungarian girl, by the way?"

"No. I—in fact I haven't yet been to Mrs. Vanderdecken's."

"Oh, I must take you. What a pity I sent the carriage away! We might have gone this afternoon. Did you like Trottie? What did you think of her?"

"She seemed very—clever. Is she a great friend of yours?"

"So, so. We're always fighting. She's peculiar. There's nothing she likes so much as to spring a surprise on people. We wondered why she was worrying us to buy concert tickets, and then suddenly on her last 'day' she introduced this girl. And I find she discovered her years and years ago, and has been training and educating her at some institution place, away in the Black Forest, which she founded entirely herself, and where friendless or homeless girls are trained for any profession or occupation they desire. As yet nothing very brilliant has come out of the institute, but Zara Eberhardt promises an exception."

"Is that her name?"

"Yes. And I must confess she's very lovely. Just that weird, magnetic style that's so taking. I expect the men will rave about her. But you must come to the concert, of course, and bring George. Only I hope he won't fall in love with the wonderful German."

"I thought you said she was Hungarian?"

"Did I? Well, it's much the same. She speaks English in a half-foreign way. I've got some tickets to sell for Trottie. You'd better take a couple. I'll give you seats near me."

She rose and moved towards a rosewood escri-

toire. At the same moment the door was thrown open, and Mrs. Vanderdecken herself swept in.

"My dear Adèle!" she exclaimed. "They said you weren't at home, so I knew I'd find you here. Ah, how d'ye do, Mrs.—I really have forgotten your name. But I'm in such confusion. What do you think has happened, Adèle? There's some hitch in the date about getting the hall, and I must either postpone Zara's concert, or give it somewhere else. So I flew to you, dearest, for I know how generous and sweet you are, and I want to ask you to let it be *here*. There won't be much trouble. I'll limit the tickets, and we won't have the professional set at all."

"Here!" exclaimed Adèle. "Oh, Trottie, it does upset a house so! Why don't you give it at your own?"

"Park Lane sounds so much better than Pont Street, and your rooms are three times the size of mine. Come, don't be selfish, dear; I must arrange it at once, for there'll be all the tickets to alter, and the people to write to. Fortunately I've a list, and my typist can set to work the moment I get back. It all depends on you."

"Oh, well, I suppose I'll have to do it," said Adèle reluctantly. "Only mind this, Trottie, two hundred, not a soul more; and my pianist must play a couple of solos."

Mrs. Vanderdecken considered. "But the programmes, dear? They're all printed now."

"Well, he can be announced—a lesser star beside a greater. If you only heard him, Trottie, you'd be wild over his playing. It's as exquisite as your Zara's voice."

"But I don't want any rival—not at her first appearance."

"It won't hurt her, and as it's a private affair now, the Press can be squared, and she'll get all the *kudos*. My boy doesn't yearn for a great public. He prefers the appreciation of kindred souls."

"Does he really play so well?"

"I tell you he's magnificent!"

"I'll take your word for it, but some of your swans, you know——"

Adèle Beaudesart laughed. "Oh, this is a *rara avis*, I promise you. Guinea tickets, of course?"

"Yes, of course. People who can't afford that are better away."

"Mrs. Brady has taken two. She'll bring George."

"Remember, Zara must have a dressing-room. She changes costume entirely for the second part. First cycle of songs, 'Purity'; second, 'Passion.' I think it will be a success, Adèle. Your pianist can play his solos in the interval between the two parts. I was going to have a child violinist, but that's stale now; there are so many child geniuses."

"A child who could do absolutely nothing

except be a child, would prove a novelty, I think," suggested Mrs. Brady.

Mrs. Vanderdecken put her head on one side meditatively. "There may be something in that," she said; "I must think it over. Dear Adèle, it's so good of you to help me out of my scrape. I thought you would. I suppose Mitchell can do the seating arrangements and platform. About a piano?"

"Oh, you can have my Steinway. Oscar is used to it."

"Do you allow him to practise *here*?" inquired Mrs. Vanderdecken, raising her eyebrows.

"Why not? He's dreadfully poor, and I adore genius in distress."

"What is his name? You've never told me."

"His real name is Oscar Jones, but professionally he is known as Herr Poseurenwitz. I invented it."

"So I should imagine. It sounds creditably foreign. And all geniuses are *poseurs*, more or less. They must be, poor creatures, or no one would believe in them. To wear your hair long is an antidote to commonplaceness of feature, and an apology for feeding powers. I never yet met an artist who didn't eat like a pig, and guzzle champagne all night. I suppose your friend has all the virtues of honest poverty to atone for his commonplace name, and his—other attractions."

"Wait till you see him."

"That's just what I mean to do."

"Suppose the two geniuses fall in love with each other," chimed in Mrs. Brady, tired of enforced silence. "Wouldn't that be romantic!"

Mrs. Vanderdecken stared at her a moment, then glanced at Adèle Beaudesart.

"I think it a most foolish suggestion," she said coldly. "Artists are the one class of persons that ought never to marry. It spoils them for—everything in art."

"But if your *protégée* is so lovely, and so gifted, men are sure to fall in love with her," went on Mrs. Brady. "It's only natural."

"Zara hates men," snapped Mrs. Vanderdecken. "Her whole soul is given to art. She has no other thought."

"And Oscar is just the same," said Adèle. "Wrapped in dreams; caring nothing for what is coarse or commonplace. His views of life are absolutely primitive. I always want to place him in a vast cool temple, all gold and white, and have a glass screen round him when he plays. He is very fair, and his hands are lovely; white and soft, like lilies. I'm not sure that I'm doing wisely in allowing him to show himself, but I suppose the world would find him out one day, so I prefer to play ministering angel to his first success. That will give me a place in his memory. I don't know why I should want a place there. It sounds rather foolish. My dear

Per, how we've been chattering, and what a good listener you make! Trottie, Mrs. Brady and I have sworn eternal friendship. Her name's Perenna. Isn't it quaint? I never met anyone with that name before. I thought all Irish women were called Bridget."

"There are a few exceptions," laughed Mrs. Brady.

"Well, I must be going," said Mrs. Vanderdecken, apparently indifferent to Irish names, and to this special Irish person.

"Ta, ta, then, my dearest. Don't wear yourself out over the concert. What's the date, the twenty-fourth? Oh no, that's the coster's affair, and Per's going to recite for them. I'll ask Tony to write something quite new, and that they'll be able to understand."

"Don't underrate their powers of comprehension," said Mrs. Vanderdecken, as she gathered her furs round her and prepared to depart. "The lower classes are getting quite clever, I hear. They won't listen to stories without a *motive* in them, and have quite an amateur belief in epigrams."

Then she went away, and with a sigh of relief Adèle resumed her chair by the fire, and picked up her dog from the rug.

"I'm never quite sure whether I'm very fond of Trottie, or not fond at all," she observed. "How does she strike you? Are you a judge

of character? You're not a bit like an Irish person. I thought you were a foreigner. Don't you ever say 'Bedad'?"

"The expression is a little obsolete," laughed Mrs. Brady, "except on the stage. There, of course, it's still a trademark. No audience would believe in an Irish character that didn't use it once every five minutes."

"And George isn't labelled either. He makes me quite cross. He can tell an Irish story to perfection, but he drops all accent after the story."

"He's been many years in England," said Mrs. Brady. "Perhaps that accounts for it."

"And you—have you lived here long?"

"No. I only come over for the season now and then. At present I mean to stay two months. I want George to live with me, but he won't leave his chambers."

"I hate town in these dreadful winter months," exclaimed Adèle. "We all take flight immediately after Christmas—some of us before. Trottie's off to Cairo. I was going to Nice, but I haven't made up my mind. The Riviera is getting so dreadfully common nowadays. You meet everyone you don't want to meet, and no one that you do. I think we've left ourselves nowhere to go that isn't commonplace. The only original thing we can do is to stay in our own houses."

"I do that very often," confessed Mrs. Brady.
"From necessity, not choice."

"Have you ever been to Egypt?"

"No, never. I told you I wasn't rich. And travelling wants more money than I can wring from my tenants."

"If you'd come with me I declare I'd go again!" exclaimed Lady Beaudesart. "To see a place under new eyes is almost as good as seeing it for the first time. You look as if nothing would bore you."

"Nothing ever does," she answered heartily.

"Dear me! What an enviable person you are! I suppose you've never stuffed your mind with foolish knowledge and impossible facts, but just left it open for impressions."

"Exactly," said Mrs. Brady, agreeing with all the more heartiness because she had never done anything of the sort.

"How wise of you! I was terribly well educated, and I can't forget it. I want to empty my mind, but it refuses to be emptied. The moment I met you I thought you were the most original woman I had ever discovered. I foresee we shall be great friends."

"I'm sure I hope so," agreed Mrs. Brady.
"But I'm not so—idealistic—as you are."

"My dear Per! Idealistic! That's only the fad of the hour. I take it up because I must do as others do. But really and truly I haven't an

idea left. How could a woman, who's had such a married life? You have heard my story, of course?"

"Oh, if you only knew how I feel, how I sympathise——"

"My dear woman, you needn't. The happiest moment of my life was the moment when I knew myself—free from Beaudesart."

"Will you ever marry again?" inquired Mrs. Brady cautiously.

Lady Beaudesart gave a wink, and murmured with the playful satire of the last music-hall slang, "What do *you* think?"

VII

ACTING unconsciously on the advice of one more wise in simplicity than herself, Mrs. Brady went home and pondered these things in her heart. Adventurous by nature, she had hitherto courted more mishaps than she deserved, and averted much good fortune that she desired.

Want of money was a serious matter if one took it seriously, but if, on the other hand, one *appliqued* (so to say) one's needs on to the skirts of those better acquainted with good fortune, then one's own deficiencies were less perceptible. She had determined that she would have some fun out of life before she finished with it, and every social success added fresh zest to her endeavours.

This last venture was one of her chance throws of Fortune's dice.

As she sat alone in her comfortable bedroom that night, lulled by the sounds of traffic passing from the great to the lesser thoroughfares, Mrs. Brady meditated on the position of affairs and finances. She had brought her own maid with her from Ireland—a shrewd and keen-witted person, with a French name grafted on to her national birthright. Mrs. Brady believed in a French maid, and knew by experience that

any peculiarity of accent passed muster in England as "foreign."

Eugénie Flavin was as often as not called "mam'selle" by German waiters at English hotels. She was accustomed to the title now, and in no way puffed up by its frequent bestowal. Occasionally she laid further claim to it by reason of a slight knowledge of French words, with which she dealt in an airy, inconsequent fashion as of one saying, "I know I am accomplished, but not vain of the fact."

She was devoted to her mistress and her fortunes, and took the keenest interest in their various social flights. When such flights developed a broken wing or a maimed limb as results, Eugénie bound up and splintered, and put the sufferer in hospital till such time as the spirit of adventure again awoke.

When, on the contrary, success attended them and the bird found itself homed and tended and made much of, Eugénie was ever ready with sympathy—and reminders.

• She came in on this special night to brush out her mistress's hair, and hear an account of the day's doings.

"I don't know that I quite like it, ma'am," she observed, as Mrs. Brady ran glibly over the luncheon, the boudoir confidences, and the advent of Mrs. Vanderdecken. "It's a quare, uncanny sort of name to begin with. Wasn't there a play,

or an opera, or something written on a gentleman with that same name? He was always flyin' away with himself, and upsettin' people all around. Maybe this lady's a relation of his."

Mrs. Brady laughed. "No, indeed, Eugénie. They're all very artistic people—the right sort, and no mistake. And as for Lady Beaudesart—she's charming, and so generous and kind-hearted."

"Is she a widdy, ma'am? Maybe she'd do for Mister George."

"He knows her, but, strange to say, he doesn't like her 'set' or herself."

"'Tis like his contrairy ways," criticised Eugénie. "He'll be a hard one to marry and settle down. Now, ma'am, if you'll take my advice, it's this: Don't be giv'ing your business away to these fine gentry. Make out you're ev'ry bit as good as they are, and a sight better if it comes to that. And you try to keep yourself on *terry firmy* this time. There's been too much bog-land where you've had the plantin' of your feet before now. If one of them countesses has taken a fancy to you, just you hould on to her tight as nails. Tell her you're as good as she; for I've heard that nothin' goes down wid people o' thim sort like owdashousness. And so just be *owdashous*, ma'am. When you're wid thim as can pay, why, *let* thim pay. And if they've got credit, you can get it. And last of all, as you say they're all just crazy on sensation, why,

you're the very one to be givin' it thim ; and the best sort o' sensation is to go the *contrairy* way o' doing things to their way o' doing thim. If they give a supper-party in a blaze o' lights, well, you give one pretty nigh in the dark. If they have chaney plates, do you have pewter pots. If they give champagne, you should be offerin' thim milk-punch. I'll be bound they'd talk fast enough !”

Mrs. Brady sat very erect, and surveyed her handsome person in her mirror.

“It's a good idea, 'pon my word, Eugénie. You've hit the nail on the head. They must be sick of imitators and imitations ! There's one thing I can do. Adèle (that's Lady Beaudesart) told me that all the smart people give dinners and luncheons at restaurants or hotels now ; never in their own houses. So silly to copy the Americans !

“Well, I shall not become a restaurant hack. If I give a dinner-party, it shall be in my own flat. It must be small and select and exclusive ; but above all and everything, Eugénie, it must be novel—*chic* to the smallest detail. You understand what I mean ?”

“I should hope I'd heard forrin' words before now, ma'am,” answered the maid loftily. “The day's past whin I need be guessin' at their manin'. With *schiek* as a word appertainin' to the dalin's of the quality, I'm sufficiently well acquainted not to misunderstand that ye'd be givin' something

quite à *la mode* with an English *soupsong* at the end of it."

"Exactly," laughed Mrs. Brady. "It would be expensive, Eugénie, but there are occasions in life when extravagance becomes a positive virtue."

Eugénie found herself secretly wishing that one of those extravagances might occasionally deal with the subject of wages, but she was really devoted to her mistress, and concluded that in better-paid service there might be less liberty and certainly less amusement.

"There niver was an Irish man or woman that wouldn't say 'yes' to that, ma'am," she observed, pausing to select a long grey hair from among the thick burnished strand in her hand. "Is it to be a funeral, ma'am, or shall I lave it?" she inquired.

"Oh, pull it out. I'll risk the other seven," laughed her mistress. "I want to make the best of myself this season. If I can only marry George—well, I'll be content."

"Sure, ma'am, contint and yourself's a long day's journey apart. And seein' you're so set on marryin' Mister George, why shouldn't ye be givin' yourself a look in? Maybe there's a good match comin' your way as well as his."

"Nonsense, Eugénie. I don't want to marry. I couldn't be bothered to put up with a man now. I've tasted the sweets of freedom too long. Besides, he'd have to be very rich, and rich men generally are old, and want young wives."

"Well, I'd not put it beyond you to catch a young man, and a rich one at that. Ye know, ma'am, 'twas always said of ye that ye'd a tongue could wheedle a bird off a bough."

"Get along with your nonsense, Eugénie; and that'll do now for my hair. I'm so sleepy; I'll go straight off to bed, and think out my dinner-party."

Eugénie retired. Unlike her mistress, she felt particularly wide awake, and not a little excited by the prospective improvement in the family fortune. She had armed herself with a sheaf of Society papers which she dearly loved, and which she now set herself to peruse in the solitude of her by no means sumptuous bedroom. The domestic accommodation of flats usually leaves much to the imagination.

The maid opened one of the papers and eagerly perused fashionable intelligence. It struck her as somewhat curious that so much apparently private information found its way into these columns. Almost one would fancy that the whole staff of the paper were doing nothing else but dancing attendance on the smart world in boudoir, dressing-room, and street. She saw Lady Beaudesart's name mentioned several times and also Mrs. Vanderdecken's. She would like to have seen that of her mistress figuring among the host of notabilities, but, as yet, it was not visible.

A little wearied of reading that Lady A—— looked smart in one costume and Mrs. B—— was well “got up” in another, that these same ladies had been seen shopping in Bond Street, or were noticeable at some reception, or supping at the Carlton, or seen just coming out of a celebrated beauty-restoring establishment, she turned to the advertisement pages. Suddenly she started, then looked again, and yet again.

“By all that’s holy, I’ve found out the saycret at last!” she cried triumphantly, and sprang up in great excitement, waving the sheet in the air. “So *that’s* how it’s done, is it? Well, it’s meself will have a try at the same game. Sure there’s a fortune maybe is to be made at sich tricks, and sorra a soul the wiser who’s playin’ thim. Well, now, only to think——”

She seated herself again, and re-read the paragraph that had so excited her.

It ran as follows :—

“REQUIRED, SOCIETY NEWS.

“LADIES who are well connected, required to collect Social Information. No experience necessary. This work can be undertaken by any girl of about twenty years of age who wishes to earn ~~extra~~ pin-money.—Apply, enclosing stamped addressed envelope, to Messrs. F. and W., Fullerton Buildings, Trafalgar Square.”*

* This is copied from an actual advertisement in a fashionable journal.

"I'll answer it meself!" exclaimed Eugénie excitedly; "and won't I be givin' thim information by-and-by! Sure, whin the mistress is fairly on her feet among all thim countesses and duchesses and 'smart' folk, as they call themselves, I'll be having the news o' thim first hand, and it's hard if I can't make up what I don't hear. And as for the wordin' of it, sure by help of a dickshonary o' the French language, not to mention the inexpressible which the gintleman says is necessary, it's a fine bit o' gossip I'll be sendin' in ivry week. Pity 'tis too late for postin' to-night, and sorra a stamp to me name; but maybe to-morrow will be soon enough, and thin I can promise all particulars o' this concert that's comin' off. Oh, the saints be praised! There's a fortune in the business if 'tis well carried out, and sure, wasn't me family always known for its literary tastes? Didn't me own gran'father die with a newspaper in his hand, and wasn't it Denis O'Hea, me own mother's brother, who wrote the poetry for the graves of the soldiers in his rigimept, whin they were killed out in Indy boyant? And meself had the pretty turn o' the pen whin I was a child learnin' at the school o' Widdy Callaghan, in County Wicklow. I'll just write the letter to-night, and be out and git me stamps first thing, to-morrow mornin', and thin huroo for ould Ireland, and Miss Eugénie Flavin, Society correspondent to the London fashionable journals!"

The letter, which took half an hour to compose, and was written in a large, somewhat unformed hand, ran as follows :—

“SIR,—The undersigned, Mademoiselle Eugénie Flavin, has the pleasure of seeing your advertisement in *The Wasp*.

“She would be glad to supply you with constant, up-to-date information respecting certain social events, and the leaders of fashion therein concerned. Mademoiselle Flavin may mention, *en passant*, that much stir and excitement will surround a certain private concert to be given in Park Lane next week. Also of a marvellous young foreign person who will sing at it.

“All such *informashion intime* is to hand of your esteemed correspondent, who will be pleased to arrange for cash terms.

“Yours respectfully,

“EUGÉNIE FLAVIN.”

“There’s for them !” exclaimed the new Society journalist admiringly, as she read over this remarkable composition. “And if I don’t git an appointment, not to say a five-pound note by return of post, thin London’s not what I take it for !”

She folded the letter, and enclosed an envelope addressed to herself. Then placed both, unfastened, on her toilet table, where they could greet her eyes on waking, and be a reminder of the new road to Fame she had elected to traverse.

VIII

THAT exceeding hopefulness of spirit which is largely allied to independence, and accounts in a great measure for the Irish hatred of coercive government, kept Eugénie Flavin from any superfluous doubts as to the success of her venture.

When, two days after her application, she found herself requested to make an appointment at the offices of "Messrs. F. and W.," she was not unduly elated. She readily obtained leave of absence from Mrs. Brady, and presented herself at the office of the Fashion Caterers. She had to wait for some moments, as the clerk informed her Mr. F—— was engaged, and Mr. W—— was out.

When the private door at last opened it was to give egress to a fair, slim young man with a mass of hair worn long and beautifully waved, and the label "artist" stamping his whole appearance. He sauntered through the outer office, giving a vague, supercilious glance at the fashionably attired "young person" who was waiting there. The young person returned the glance from a pair of sharp, inquisitive eyes that generally contrived to see a great deal, and reveal—very little.

"I've seen you before," thought Eugénie, "but I can't remember *where*. I couldn't forget your appearance, for you look for all the world like them females with the divided skirts that can't be told from the men folk."

"Will you walk in, miss?" said the clerk abruptly, and she, in turn, passed through the jealously guarded door behind which so many marvellous secrets were disclosed, and bargained for.

Eugénie had resolved to keep guard over any tendency to "brogue," and confine herself to a semi-French dialect which might pass muster as foreign.

Her appearance struck the *dernier cri* of fashion as supplied by her mistress's wardrobe, and she was quite unhampered by any feelings of diffidence, or self-consciousness. The only difficulty presented by her new rôle lay in curbing a national exuberance of speech.

Mr. F—— was a very young man, with a long, thin face, and long, lank hair. He hailed from the Land of the Stars and Stripes, and proposed teaching the plodding behind-the-times Britisher a thing or two in smart journalism. He looked sharply at his visitor, and motioned her to a chair.

"Miss—Flayin, I presume?"

"*Madermerselle*," corrected Eugénie in her new voice.

"I beg pardon; I forgot."

He referred to a letter on the table, and watched her from under drooping lids. "You're French?"

"*Mais—wee, certainmong,*" agreed Eugénie, with quite Parisian airiness. "*Mongsure* has my letter—*ma lettre.*"

("The divil help me! How am I to keep it up?" she breathed in a self-aside.)

"Yes," said the editor, "I have. You are confidential lady's-maid."

"*Companong,*" corrected Eugénie. "*Companong de voyage,* the trusted friend of Madame de Brady. *Ong affay,* acquainted *parfatemong* with many *darm de la monde aristocratick.* *Par example,* Madame de Beaudesart, and Madame de Vanderdecken."

Mr. F—— lifted his lids and shot a sharp glance at his visitor. "You know these ladies?"

Eugénie swept the office and himself, with an eloquent eye. "Know them? *Mais certainmong.* Of course I know them."

"Lady Adèle Beaudesart, of Park Lane?"

"*Ler mame schose.* She is the *armée particulière* of Madame de Brady."

"Do you think we might get over our business quicker if you talked plain English?" suggested the editor.

Eugénie struggled with hurt feelings, and other difficulties.

"Plain? My Engleesh, is it not to be understood of *mongsure?*"

"Oh, I understand you right enough ; but if you'd make less effort maybe we'd get over the ground quicker. My time's valuable."

"*Mongsure* wishes, then, that I depart ; *rétrade*, taking all my so valuable information *avec moeur*?" questioned Eugénie in a hurt voice.

"Oh no ! If you've got anything to say, or sell, I am willing to bargain. But you know you could just as well say it straight out. I'll ask a few questions. You needn't rigmarole. Plain 'yes' or 'no' is good enough for me."

"*Daymonday dong* !" ejaculated Eugénie in a tragic voice.

"First, your mistress—employer, I should say?"

"*Madame de Brady*, with estates in County Wicklow. One *tres grande dame de Campayne*; *tres rische*, and with a *peeay de teere à Londres*.

"It is there we remain at present."

"She knows Lady Beaudesart?"

"*Wee, wee*. I have it said."

"And Mrs. Vanderdecken?"

"*Vray-ossey*."

"Could you, through your mis—I mean, through Mrs. de Brady—procure me information respecting these ladies—their engagements, their toilettes, their various entertainments?"

"Of coorse. *Pardong*; *wee, mongsure*, I could."

"How am I to know your information is trustworthy? I mean what *bona fides* can you give?"

Eugénie hesitated, distrustful of traps laid in another foreign language. She clasped her hands, gazed at the ceiling, and softly breathed—
“*Hélar!*”

“What?” interrupted the young editor, so sharply that her hands and glance fell simultaneously.

“I mean, why should not you believe me? My credenshals are the best reference.”

“Your English might easily be better than either,” said the young man dryly. “However, I suppose you prefer to be incomprehensible, like most of your sex. I see Mrs. Brady lives in Mount Street. The *pied à terre* you spoke of?”

“*Wee, mongsure.*”

“The address seems all right,” he said thoughtfully.

“*Mongsure!*”

“Well, what I require is direct information respecting certain ladies in Society. Perhaps I should say a certain set in Society. (They grow more numerous every day!) Your letter promises the information I need.”

Eugénie bowed complacently. “*Tres bong!*” she observed.

“My paper comes out every Monday morning. By Saturday night, when we go to press, I should want the latest information you can gather respecting these people. Nothing need be too trivial. I will promise to pay you at the

rate of half a guinea for every paragraph. One has to be so mighty careful of libel actions in these days that I mayn't be able to use much of your stuff. Besides, I'll have to put it into proper words."

"Proper? Is it, then, that *mongsure* considers my words not *propaire*?"

He smiled. "I was only speaking editorially. There's another sort of information I need also."

"*Mongsure* has but to *parlay*—to explain."

"Well, doubtless these aristocratic ladies have plenty of jewellery."

"*Beejoateree!* Oh, *mais, wee!* *Ong affay* there is madame herself——"

"I did not specially allude to Mrs. Brady."

"*Les oters dames?* Oh, they've jewels galore!" exclaimed Eugénie, slipping into her accustomed vernacular. "*Pardong,*" she went on confusedly.

"*Mongsure* desires that information?"

"I do. A catalogue of the most remarkable, in case of . . . Well, countesses and duchesses are constantly being robbed. Sometimes the burglary is real, sometimes it is necessary."

"But how? Necessary?"

"Oh, for a sensation, when things are a bit flat. They needn't really be robbed, except in a 'par.' And that, again, can always be contradicted."

Eugénie looked slightly bewildered. "They

are to be robbed, the *beejooteree* stolen, yet not stolen!"

He smiled. "I guess we can let that business stand over for a time. Only if you get hold of a *description* of any jewels it will come in handy. Do you catch on?"

"I would not put it beyond my powers of diplomacy," she said gravely.

The editor's eyes twinkled. "Then I guess we can come to terms. Of course you're not—quite—the sort of person I advertised for. I explained that. But, on the other hand, you seem just likely to get hold of information respecting certain people I'm particularly curious *about*. Mrs. V., as we'll call her, has a perfectly *immense* reputation for eccentricity. It's astonishing how interested people are in her, and in this secret society, or Cult of hers. Lady B., on the other hand, is supposed to be very smart. Given to kicking over the traces and little things like that. Now these two ladies would be of use to my paper, if I could be *sure* that what I said of them was true. They're mighty skeered of letting out their confidences in a general way, but maybe a friend like your mistress could get at the bottom of their secrets safe enough. I might, of course, try a deal with *her*, first hand."

("I'd not be advisin' you do it," interposed Eugénie, *sotto voce*.)

"On the other hand, if I try *you* and you turn

out reliable, I'll raise your salary according to the value of your information. Is it—done?"

Eugénie pondered. If he hadn't been so very young, if he hadn't talked so very quickly, she might have felt more confidence in his position. She looked round the editorial sanctum. It was neatly and substantially furnished, and had a business-like air about it. Through a half-glass door opposite she caught sight of a row of typewriter girls, their heads bent over their machines. On a table near by were piles and piles of the fashionable journal under present discussion. She felt as if an era of social importance had dawned upon her life, and dazzling visions of wealth flitted before her mental vision.

"Our own contributor" spelt Fame to her inexperience, and offered no difficulties whatever to her intellectual powers.

But this boy, this smooth-faced, sharp-eyed interrogator, could he be trusted? Was he really manager of the paper and controller of its fortunes, as well as authority for its scandals?

"What's happened? Anything fresh struck you?" demanded the young man sharply. "My time's running short. No contributor gets more than ten minutes' interview. If that doesn't clinch a bargain, why, it's off."

"Oh, I was only—cogitating. *Pardonnay moi!*" exclaimed Eugénie. "It makes, of course, that I conform to *monsieur's* terms, temporary *nous*

dites? I confess that I expected from *mongsure* a higher scale of salary. † Something *plus arproppo* to the position of his paper in the *bow monde*. But when he finds out how valuable is my information——”

“Exactly,” he interposed. “I am quite disinterested. Who *can* give what I want is worth my paying. Who *can't* . . . can just take their hook, vamp—see?”

“*Je comprong*. But let me assure *mongsure* that he will be delighted—*charmed ong affay*, with my contribution! *Les schoses extrayordinaire* that come my way. Oh, *tdot-ersay extrayordinaire!*”

“All right. You let me have those ‘extraordinaire’ things, and you shall have a weekly cheque in return. Now good morning.”

“I wish *mongsure ung bow ojoordwee*,” replied Eugénie graciously, as she rose. “Ah, it reminds me; one *mompng!* Has it, then, come to the ears of *mongsure* of the *tray grande* concert that is to be given at the house of Lady Beaudesart, of Park Lane.”

“At Lady B’s . . . not at Queen’s Hall?”

“*Lays arrangeymans* are temporarily deranged,” continued his informant. “All particulars respecting the concert and the *programm d'affairs*, as well as the interest appertaining thereto, may be procured from but one *persong*.”

“Well?”

“That *persong, ong affay*, is at present giving

to *mon'sure* the opportunity of securing the information aforesaid by—a temporary advancement of salary."

"Oh, I see!" he laughed. "'Pon my word, you're a cute one. All right. Just dictate a few lines—the gist of what you've heard."

He opened his purse and took out a note which he laid open on the blotting-pad beside him.

Eugénie's face betokened awakened interest in the fields of literature.

The editor drew a sheet of paper towards him, and handled a stylo professionally.

"Go on," he said briefly.

* * * * *

When Mademoiselle Flavin left the editorial offices a quarter of an hour later, she was the richer by a five-pound note.

IX

LORD CHRIS and Basil Warrender were smoking, while the one painted and the other criticised.

The studio was an artistic compliment to the many aristocratic sitters who had contributed to its furnishing and adornment. Bazaars and art shops had been ransacked for its oriental rugs and Japanese draperies, for its *bizarre* and quaint ornaments, and the many curios and beautiful things it contained. On an easel stood the half-completed portrait of Mrs. Vanderdecken, one of those exquisite compliments to *passée* beauty for which Basil was famed. A weird charm surrounded this portrait. It seemed to have caught something of the sitter's idiosyncrasies; her would-be-voluptuous nature; her odd mixture of the spiritual and the sensuous.

The artist was touching and softening the sharp lines of the cheek, and listening with an amused smile to his companion's observations.

"Truth in art! Why, my dear Chris, no one knows better than yourself that art is the one absolutely untrue thing in the world! Who

would dare put on canvas a single scene of nature in the real crude, unshaded colours that it presents? The effect would be awful. Critics may abuse impressionists as they please, but at least they escape the vulgarity of the realists."

"It is an age of vulgarity," murmured Lord Chris, between languid puffs of his cigarette. "The papers say so, and they're always right. We are all too noisy, too self-assertive, too much *en évidence*. The other classes would respect us more if they heard less of us than the papers permit."

"Those damned papers are at the root of all the rot that's talked about us," muttered Basil Warrender. "One seems to live under glass nowadays. All we do and say and think is telephoned and telegraphed and paragraphed for us, whether we like it or not. Who gives us away? I often wonder."

"Our dearest friends and our nearest attendants," drawled Lord Chris. "Myself, I'm sure my man Travers contributes to the Society papers. He's always so anxious to see them the day they come out. And he has, on those occasions, the sleek, self-satisfied aspect of the successful journalist. You know that aspect, Basil?"

"I think I do," said Warrender grimly. "But why do you let Travers know your affairs?"

"My dear fellow!" Lord Chris nearly dropped

the cigarette in sheer astonishment. "You ask that? Why, you Arcadian Babe, is there a single secret of our lives we can keep from our domestic spies? Who open our letters, and know their contents before we do? Who search our waste-paper baskets? Who know our appointments, our debts, and our *affaires* as well as we ourselves know them? Who but the social detectives we are bound to keep in our service—the heartless traitors to whom we are the mere unimportant appendage of a position? I tell you, Basil, there's never a divorce case, a scandal, a villainy, be its nature murder, theft, or intrigue, but one of our household is aware of it, and would betray it any moment. How could the papers get hold of the things they do if it wasn't for our servants? Princes, millionaires, titles, and shoddies, we all share the same fate. Pilloried by the Press to make sport for the public—which sounds uncommonly well, by Jove! Is it any wonder we try to seem more ridiculous than we are? It's the only way we can get a rise out of them—the only revenge left us."

"I—fortunately—am not troubled with a staff of time-servers," observed Basil.

"Yet even you are talked about!"

"Which shows how much I am indebted to my fair-sitters' lady's-maids."

"But you needn't mind," observed Lord Chris consolingly. "The only road to Fame now is

the highway of tittle-tattle. It's better to be spoken of at a dinner-party than to have a column to yourself in *The Times*."

"I'm quite sure of that," said Basil. "I've proved it. No art critic can make or mar my fame. It has been done without their leave, and they know I don't need to exhibit."

"But you do?"

"Oh yes, that's the reason. When the judges know you don't care whether you're hung or not, why—they hang you."

"Shall you send—that?" asked Lord Chris, pointing to the half-length of Mrs. Vanderdecken stretched in her favourite languid attitude on a tiger skin, with a pile of gold-coloured cushions behind her tawny head, and pale, weird face.

"No . . . She objects."

"I wonder why. As a rule Trottie rather courts public notice."

The painter laughed.

"Who can account for a woman's vagaries?"

"By the way, have you seen her new wonder?" asked Lord Chris.

"The Hungarian singer? No. I've heard, of course. But I've not been to Trottie's for ages, and she always comes here alone. What about the wonder? Is she——"

"She is," answered Lord Chris slowly; "and the most beautiful creature I have ever seen."

"Praise from *you*—of a woman!"

"It's rare, I grant. But in this case it's deserved; and not only is she physically beautiful, but she has a voice as exquisite as herself."

Basil ceased touching the portrait, and looked at his companion steadily.

"A discovery of—Trottie's?"

"Yes; she has sprung her upon us without any preparation."

"From that mysterious college?"

Lord Chris nodded, and silence fell between the two men for a space.

"What does she intend to do with the girl?" asked Basil at length.

"I believe she wants to astonish the world with her. She will appear first at a concert to be given at Adèle's house; it had been arranged for Queen's Hall, but that's off. I heard only this morning. She's doing a song of mine. I composed it expressly for her."

"At such short notice?" questioned the artist, raising his brows.

"Inspiration with me means accomplishment. Time is quite unimportant."

"Not in a musical sense, I hope," laughed Basil; "or your composition might suffer."

"She sings it like a true artist."

"No woman is ever *that*. They are too self-conscious, and they always look at the decorative side of art. A woman's dress is as much a consideration for the platform as her repertoire—more

important even. A man can't suffer like that. He is relegated to one choice, and his mind, therefore, can triumph over matter in the unembarrassed freedom of a dress-coat. The dress-coat of years if he is a true artist, for shabbiness is allied to genius. Fancy, a woman in a worn-out shabby gown at her first public appearance! She might sing like an angel, but people wouldn't believe in her! The gown is half the battle. It could even excuse a false note, or a modern ballad." "

"My ballads are modern, Basil."

"But they are altogether too wonderful to come into a St. James's Hall programme, even if the words were passed by the Licensor of Public Morals."

"It is true I have set Swinburne's 'Daybreak,'" murmured Lord Chris apologetically. "But then it has only been sung to my own private friends."

"And what have you written for this 'Wonder Girl'?"

"It is quite pure—really. One's grandmother might listen to it without a blush."

Basil Warrender laughed. "I fancy our grandmothers are the only women left who *can* blush. Certainly it's a feat beyond the power of the Society maiden."

"After all it's a very unbecoming performance," continued Lord Chris. "When I was among the costers lately, seeking inspiration for that recita-

tion I have promised to write for Adèle's Irish friend, I said something to one of those weird things with a mania for feathers, and large muddy boots. She got as red as a poppy, and spluttered with silly laughter. Then she said, 'Lor, gar long with yer!' It struck me, Basil, that the East End has had the task of picking up the superfluous consonants we make a rule of dropping in the West."

"Perhaps so. I never looked at it in that light."

"I am singularly gifted with original ideas," lamented Lord Chris. "I often wish I could dispense with them."

"You dispense *them*, which is just as good."

"No, Basil. There is a difference; subtle, I grant, but still a difference. My brain seeks an outlet for its teeming fancies; the burden is almost oppressive until I find relief in utterance of some shape. To dispense *with* this burden would be to sink my own personality. I am proud to carry it, while the world gets the benefit of its contents."

"Oh, my dear fellow, you are altogether too wonderful for me! Still, it's no paradox to say art without expression is valueless. If you can't make other people see and feel what you see and feel, you might just as well be an idiot as a genius."

"I'm not sure the idiot hasn't the best of it,"

observed Lord Chris, rising languidly from the saddlebag divan. "Words, after all, are not as real as the thoughts that inspire them. It's a pity human beings can't communicate intelligibly by the aid of ideas; unspoken, of course."

"A sort of wireless telepathy of the mind," laughed Basil Warrender. "Well, the *Vie Intime* goes in for that, doesn't it? Comprehension—without expression. Sympathy of kindred beings subtly conveyed by an inner intelligence."

"That is what we seek. But few have found the search successful."

"Your special affinity, then——"

He shook his head. "A dream, a will-o'-the-wisp, for ever escaping. Recently I thought it was captured. It took the form of this wonder-child. When she sang my *balladina* I felt sure. But she is cold, reserved; at times—impossible. She has eluded me somewhat. I think Trottie is alarmed. Of course, there's the concert."

"I don't wish to see her until that occasion," said Warrender.

"Perhaps you are wise."

There was another space of silence while Basil went on with his painting.

"Why have you done *that*?" asked Lord Chris suddenly.

"Done what?"

"Touched that eye. Don't you see how you've altered the expression?"

The artist retreated a few steps, and contemplated the picture critically.

"Odd that chance should have done what I wanted. I only caught that look in her eyes once." •

"It's in the eyes of only one other woman in the world of art," said Lord Chris, with sudden gravity. "I saw it in an obscure portrait gallery in a Roman palazzo."

"Who was the woman?" inquired Basil with some curiosity.

Lord Chris glanced at him with an enigmatical smile. "The Empr̃ess Popp̃æa," he said.

X

ZARA EBERHARDT gave little thought or attention to anything beyond her art for the time being. She had a professional lesson every day, and devoted hours to practice. Sometimes in the early morning she would walk in the park, accompanied by Mrs. Vanderdecken's maid and the wonderful Eldorado. The rest of the time was spent in study or reading.

Her rendering of Lord Chrissy's song was now quite perfect, and he expressed a desire to accompany it himself on the occasion of the concert. It was scarcely possible, he suggested, that a paid accompanist could render so subtle and indelicate a composition with the requisite meaning.

When the evening of the concert at last arrived, Zara herself was the calmest and most self-possessed of that "*cercle intime*" who were so curious about her *début*.

From her first attitude of grumbling indifference, Lady Beaudesart had developed into enthusiasm. The artists' room was arranged with every view to artistic comfort, and a footman was specially told off to supply bowls of hot water at

intervals in which the wonderful pianist kept his hands submerged, so that they might be supple and intelligent, he explained, when the time came to use them.

He was a source of intense delight to Lord Chris, who had found him at this occupation when he strolled in to talk to Zara preparatory to her professional appearance.

The accompanist, an intelligent young German, was arranging the songs in order, according to the programme. Zara had arrived, but was in the dressing-room receiving the maid's last attentions.

Lord Chris rescued his own MS. from Herr Schmidt's irreverent hands, and put it aside. It was then he observed the great Poseurenwitz with his basin of steaming water.

He stood contemplating the youth in silence, as he dipped one long white hand and then the other into the bowl.

"May I ask if there's anything the matter with your hands?" he inquired.

"The matter? Oh no," drawled the artist languidly. "It is simply my habit to suppleise my fingers before playing. The great Maccaroni recommends it, you know."

"Maccaroni?" queried Lord Chris, raising his eyebrows.

"Yes. Surely you have heard of him! The inventor of hand gymnastics, warranted to turn ordinary players into trained pianists. I've gone

through his complete course. You see, it's like this. The intelligence of the brain is one thing; the physical capacity another. The hand demands a certain amount of physical training, just as a gymnast's body requires it, before it can execute what the brain desires. By training the hand independently one is saved hours of laborious study. Touch, expression, force are achieved, so to say, outside the realms of actually practised music. And when your hands have become your servants, your brain turns them into an intelligent force."

"Most interesting," drawled Lord Chris. "Have you been before the public long?"

"This will be my first London appearance. Lady Beaudesart is my patroness. She has been most kind. She is good enough to believe in my genius, and wishes others to share her opinion."

"Oh, is that so? I've not had the curiosity to look at the programme. What are you playing?"

"An Étude of Moszkowski, and the B Flat Minor Sonata of Chopin."

"Op. 35? The one with the Funeral March. Isn't that rather a—strange choice?"

"It is to impress, to solemnise; to make this fashionable crowd pause for one moment and think. Think of the pageant over, the curtain

fallen on the last act, the night descending 'on the brevity of day."

Lord Chris stared at the speaker. Then he laughed. "I shouldn't have thought you were so—ambitious," he said. "You must be very young."

"I am young, as years go," sighed the genius plaintively. "But old enough to have communed with Art, and heard its strange, unspeakable mysteries."

Again Lord Chrissy's eyes searched the imperturbable face. To hear his own jargon quoted so gravely to his own face, made him wonder if the boy was playing tricks, or had been instructed in other matters than the Macaroni technique. Further conversation, however, was interrupted by the sudden entrance of Zara.

All three men gazed at her with a wonder that surpassed mere admiration.

She was clothed entirely in white; filmy, cobwebby, transparent white. Her lovely throat and arms were bare. No colour relieved the snowy purity of her aspect, save the dark, shining masses of her hair and the deep poppy-hue of her lips.

She nodded carelessly to Lord Chris. "You are not of the first part," she said. "I thought I would see you with the audience."

"I came to offer my good wishes for your success, but I need not have feared. You have

only to show yourself. Trottie was quite right. I sent you some flowers, by the way. Won't you carry them?"

"They are in my way. But, yes—if it please you. They are only *there*, in my dressing-room."

"Let me tell your maid."

The maid appeared even as he spoke, and the maid was no less a person than Mademoiselle Flavin.

Zara took the negligently arranged blossoms, snowy as her gown, save for trailing sprays of green, and gave a long, steadfast glance at herself in the opposite mirror.

Then the accompanist intimated that time was up, and she swept forward and on to the platform, with the coolness and self-possession of a trained artiste, to whom such things as "nerves" were unknown.

Lord Chris followed slowly, and stood at one side of the entrance door, where he could see the radiant figure and the exquisite face. A faint, sibilant murmur stirred the air, as the gazing crowd devoured and criticised its new victim.

But Zara saw nothing and no one. Her eyes rested on the flowers she held, and her ears listened keenly for the note that was her own signal.

Programmes fluttered in gloved hands. Again

that strange division of the songs aroused comment.

A SONG CYCLE

BY

ZARA EBERHARDT.

• PART I.

• SONGS OF PURITY.

• "Das Mädchen." . . .

a. { "Morgen Lied." }
 b. { "Abend Lied." }

Peace.

• • PART II.

SONGS OF PASSION.

• "The Tzigane's Death-kiss."

"Fated."

"The Pure Soul."

At the end of the programme was a note to the effect that between Parts I. and II. Herr Oscar Poseurenwitz would perform two pianoforte solos, the names of which would be announced.

Zara's first song was a weird, dreamy melody, the monologue of a maiden standing on the threshold of life, and half glad, half fearful of its possible meaning. Her voice so clear, so inexpressibly plaintive, thrilled out on the silent room with the same magical power that had

enthralled her previous audience. These sated, listless, curious people felt that something quite apart from pre-conceived or pre-realised ideas of concert-singing, met them in the personality of this wonderful girl.

Her beauty was startling, but such a voice, allied to such beauty, awoke a mad enthusiasm, not quite unmixed with awe.

For here was something quite apart and removed from themselves. Something that not only aroused, but satisfied that passion for sensation so much a necessity of their existence.

Mrs. Vanderdecken had been right in her judgment. Zara was *bizarre*, exquisite, wonderful; but also she was *new*. She had none of the stale professional tricks, none of the pretences of artistic feeling. She was simply herself, and her singing was the expression of herself. She looked as pure as her song, as eloquent of its meaning as the girl whose story she told. The magnetism of her voice was only an outcome of the magnetism of her person. She held her audience in thrall from the first note to the last.

Perhaps the stifled sigh, sign of pent-up emotion, that escaped on that last sweet *sostenuto* phrase, was a greater compliment than the applause that followed.

Zara had been drilled, and taught the platform "bow," but she was so astonished at the whirlwind she had aroused that she stood half petrified;

motionless and trembling; her great eyes sweeping over the excited faces, the colour coming and going in her cheeks. Then, with a swift recollection of conventional obligations, she swept a low, graceful curtsy. As her eyes once more reached the level of excited faces, they rested on one where excitement and interest had aroused a passionate enthusiasm. Her eyes met those dark blue brilliant eyes with a sense of dawning power. She smiled as a pleased child might have smiled, quite as unconscious as such a child of the swift current of sympathy that charged a dual recognition.

Then the accompanist began the prelude to her second song, and she relapsed into the artiste. The enthusiasm increased. At the end of each acknowledgment the girl's eyes sought that sympathetic glance which seemed to say so much more than the applauding crowd. It never failed her.

She was forced to repeat her last song before she could finally leave the platform. Then the storm of applause was swelled by a storm of criticism, discussion, exclamation, that threatened loss of vital energy sufficient to encourage Herr Poseurenwitz.

Lady Beaudesart was on tenter-hooks.

It really wasn't fair of Trottie to have sprung a genuine genius upon them. She at least had never expected Zara to be as true an artiste, as she was lovely a woman. The rôle of one or other

would have meant equal success in the opinions of the Cult. But both——

Poor Oscar Poseurenvitz did his best to proclaim the Maccaroni technique as interpreted by genius, but Society was getting tired of pianists, and the Chopin Funeral March bored them to death. Surely it was bad enough to have heard it murdered by church organs, and military bands, without being recalled once more to serious possibilities. The lily hands and languid attitudes of the new pianist failed to arouse even passing interest, and Adèle Beaudesart was secretly wild at the frosty reception of her *protégé*.

She recognised, too late, that it is rarely given to two stars to shine with equal brilliancy in the same orbit, and regretted her insistence on Oscar's appearance.

He himself was so disgusted at the indifference of his audience, that he left the instrument without playing the final movement of the Sonata. Thus paving the way for the second part of the Song Cycle, by the boredom and melancholy he had inflicted.

Zara was standing in the artists' room as he appeared.

He was so hurt at the coldness of his reception, that when his eyes fell on her he burst out into a natural Cockney rage, that for the moment got the better of artistic feelings. Fortunately Zara did

not understand half of what he said, but she recognised that he was angry.

"I regret; I am sorry; but what fault is to me?" she asked quaintly, as she gazed at his wrathful face and twitching lips.

Eugénie, who was giving the finishing touches to poppy-hued draperies, felt called upon to interfere.

"Sure, an' what's the good of abusin' the young lady?" she exclaimed. "It's no fault of hers that she's beautiful and clever, and that people has eyes in their heads to see it for themselves. And what could ye expect but that they'd find ye out with all your grand name and lady-like airs. Don't I know meself that your father's only a trombone player at Camberwell, and your mother was once a music-hall singer till her voice broke with gin-drinking, and she took to washin' instead?"

The face of Herr Poseurenwitz at this indictment, presented a study in alternate streaks of scarlet and white.

"How—how *dare* you utter such infamous things!" he spluttered.

"Oh, then, indeed, they're true enough, and, no one knows it better than yerself," retorted Eugénie. "I don't see why I should be makin' any secret of the knowledge either. There's thim in the papers as would gladly pay for the informashun."

"Hold your tongue! Do you want to ruin me?" he whispered hoarsely.

Eugénie laughed. "Oh, I'm not sayin' that me power and me will are the same. But don't ye be usin' your tongue to insult this young lady here. Could ye expect that her beauty and genius was to suffer for your trumpery fireworks? Anyways, you've had your blow, and sarves ye right. Now, mardemerselle, you permit? The people beyond seem gettin' impayshunt. I'll be carryin' your train for you."

She raised the exquisite fabric with careful hands, and followed Zara to the edge of the platform.

Poor Oscar Jones sank into a chair, and with a furious gesture clapped his hands to his ears as if to shut out the sounds of rapturous greeting evoked by his rival.

The sensation created by Zara's reappearance, more than equalled Mrs. Vanderdecken's anticipation. That a concert singer should change her costume during the performance was really a novelty that appealed to jaded tastes. The radiant white vision of purity, was now the scarlet-clad sensuous interpreter of Passion. They could scarcely reconcile the two impersonations—the white lily, and the glorious flame-like poppy!

With her changed dress it seemed also as if Zara had changed natures. The frenzied defiance of her gipsy song, which was declaimed with

head erect and hands clasped behind her slender swaying body, electrified the listeners. It set pulses thrilling and hearts beating. It was like a trumpet-call to battle, the battle of the senses, the passionate outcry of prisoned nature as it dashed to earth the bars that denied it freedom. The marvel was that a girl could sing such a song. A song of mountain and woods, of lawless savagery and lawless love, through which thrilled the desolation of betrayed passion.

But Zara sought in vain for approval in the one face to which she now looked for it.

It was cold, unmoved, unresponsive.

Had she but known it, her whole appearance as well as her change of subject, were distasteful to this silent critic. She jarred upon him; wildly beautiful though she was. Yet an unaccountable fascination held him in his place. He wanted to leave, yet he wanted to hear her sing; but more and more her songs displeased him, as did her *abandon*, her wild gestures, her flame-coloured draperies. But the other listeners were mad with delight. It was long since anything so original, so entrancing, had come their way.

When she sang "The Pure Soul," the excitement was worthy of a quite unsoulful audience on whom Dan Leño or Arthur Roberts were wasting their exquisite genius.

This song was imperatively re-demanded, and Zara gave the last verse again. Lord Chris

played the accompaniment with all the false fervour of which he was master. When he too stood by the side of the singer, and bowed acknowledgment of the frenzied plaudits, George Murphy, who had been sitting beside Mrs. Brady, met her eyes unsmilingly.

He was suddenly conscious that it was possible to pay too high a price even for—sensation.

XI

LADY BEAUDESART had invited a select number of her intimates to remain on to supper and be introduced to the New Wonder, Mrs. Brady and George were among them. But when she had an opportunity of looking round the circle of tables placed about the supper-room, she failed to distinguish the handsome young barrister at any of them.

It being a purely unconventional gathering, she leant across her table and called to Mrs. Brady, who was at an opposite one, "What's become of George?"

The devoted aunt cast an anxious glance around.

"I'm sure I don't know. He was complaining of a headache. Perhaps it got worse and he went home."

"I think it's disgraceful of him," said Adèle. Then she turned to her sulky genius, and tried to persuade him that devilled oysters and dry champagne were antidotes for non-appreciation. But Oscar was suffering from a certain form of nervous terror, the result of Eugénie's candour, and his

appetite had completely failed. He could not understand how this waiting-maid had procured her information, and he dreaded a possible use of it. If Lady Beaudesart, or any of her friends, found out who he really was, what would become of him, he asked himself. Could even the greatest genius hope for recognition hampered by the antecedents of a trombone and a washing-tub?

It was hardly to be expected.

Now and then he glared at Zara, to whom Lord Chris was paying devoted attention, and of whom Basil Warrender's eyes had grown curiously observant.

"I suppose," he remarked at last to his sympathetic hostess—"I suppose that foreign girl will come out in regular form now."

"Oh no. Not till next June, so Trottie says."

He took heart of grace. No memory is so short-lived as that of a fashionable audience. A success dropped has to be a success re-created, and he was to appear at St. James's Hall early in the new year.

"Do *you* think her so very wonderful?" he asked Lady Beaudesart.

She shrugged pearly shoulders in a manner dangerous to the readjustment of her corsage.

"She's *new*; that's the great thing. And we've not had the change-of-costume trick done by a concert singer before. Trottie is really very clever. It's so wonderful to be *first* with anything, even an idea. The world is so full of repetitions."

"And all this fuss is really because she appeared in two different dresses."

"Exactly. I'm quite sure, Oscar, that if you adopted a particular dress for Chopin, and another for—who else is it you play?—oh, Liszt!—you'd have all London flocking to hear you."

Oscar contemplated his long white fingers pensively. "Such an opinion does not say much for the appreciation of true art," he observed, with plaintive meaning.

"Oh, art's all bosh!" said Adèle Beaudesart frankly. "Do you suppose twenty out of every hundred who go to concerts care for or understand the *music*? Not a bit. They go because they've heard it's the proper thing to appreciate a special instrumentalist or vocalist. And if they know there's to be a crowd they rush all the more. It means so much to be one of a *right* crowd, you know."

He sipped his champagne meditatively. "Your remarks only apply to the middle classes, I suppose. I have no wish to attract them."

"They're the paying class," laughed Adèle; "so even geniuses have to conciliate them. I suppose you want to make money as well as fame?"

He shuddered slightly. "I have not allowed myself to consider my art in a sordid sense as yet."

"Oh, of course, you could leave terms and things to your agent," said Lady Beaudesart

vaguely. "Like Patti and Paderewski, you know. I believe they have their cheques brought to them on a salver before they go on to the platform. So wise, and so delightfully unbusiness-like."

"Who is that—lady—over there? No, the third table with the green lights," asked Oscar suddenly.

"That? Oh, Mrs. Gideon Lee, the actress. Have you ever seen her act at the Independant? She's so wonderful. Such a pity she can't get on at a really good theatre. But they're all full up just now with mediocrities."

"I don't seem to have heard her name," observed the genius. "But I seldom go to a theatre. The modern drama is totally devoid of interest. It's either deadly dull, or feebly indecent. One gets quite enough of both in everyday life without taking them in the form of amusement."

"Amusement? Did I hear anyone use that misunderstood expression?" interposed Lord Chris, turning from his own table towards theirs. "What is amusement? I confess I've never found it."

Oscar leant towards him with gentle deference. "Nor I," he said. "I suppose it's a word that gets into the papers, and then people try to believe it means something."

"People are very ready to believe that amusement means—something. That's why they pay for it. Anything they pay for represents a certain

value. If they pay for being amused, they believe they are amused."

"I think the endeavour to find amusement in any shape is the only serious occupation of our lives," observed Adèle Beaudesart. "We succeed more or less badly."

"It is an occupation that has degenerated into a habit," said Lord Chris. "And habit rules every well-disciplined life. If it wasn't for a national belief in habit, the English would be as immoral as the French and as unsocial as the Germans. Instead of that, they send their worst men into Parliament and make bishops of their best."

A few faces turned in the direction of the speaker. He was always more or less entertaining to his disciples.

"Are the bishops our best men?" asked Mrs. Vanderdecken. "I suppose they *are* good. They look it, or is it only the dress? I always think their sleeves so effective."

"And I always wonder why a High-Church dignitary has to dress his arms, and undress his legs," said Adèle Beaudesart. "Does it convey a sense of piety to the congregation?"

"A piety that has no need of—understanding," drawled Lord Chris.

Everybody laughed, and he looked mildly apologetic.

"They're usually so *thin*," he explained. "But

as Gilbert wittily remarks, 'the punishment fits the crime.'"

"A crime to be a bishop? I thought it was the reward of very high merit," said Mrs. Vanderdecken.

"That," said Lord Chris, "is the general belief. It is carefully fostered for the good of the nation. But really a bishop is only an object of awe to very young curates, and Sunday-school children. The majority of his spiritual brethren never think of obeying him."

Basil Warrender was talking softly to Zara. He wanted to paint her, in her misty scarlet draperies, and in that wild, defiant pose of the Zingara.

She seemed somewhat absent-minded. In point of fact, she was conscious of an acute disappointment. She had expected to find that special listener among the assembled guests, and he was nowhere to be seen.

Suddenly a mellow voice sounded close beside her.

"I must offer you my congratulations. I've never heard anything so wonderful as your singing."

Mrs. Brady had drawn her chair a little closer to the table.

Zara felt a comforting warm thrill at her heart when that voice sounded in her ear. It had such a true, rich ring about it, and the frank, handsome

face was so kind. She felt as one who hears a friend's welcome after a tiring journey.

"I am glad. . . . I did not know if I should please. It is all so strange—*natürlich*. And I feel, now, oh, so—how can I say?—*verwirrt*."

She looked hopelessly at Warrender.

"Bewildered—put out—exactly," he explained.

"And no wonder. You have passed through an ordeal trying enough to a tried artist."

"Are you going to appear in public?" asked Mrs. Brady.

"In public? Ah, no; not for long yet. I have so much to study."

Mrs. Brady looked at Basil Warrender. "One would not say so. She seems quite perfect."

"Art is never that," he answered. "The sublime discontent it leaves behind its every success, is the only safeguard against mediocrity." He translated his sentence into German, which he spoke fluently, as a reminiscence of student days at Heidelberg. Zara nodded delightedly.

The tables were now breaking up, and the parties separating according to inclination or affinity. Cigarette-boxes appeared, and men and women smoked with that pleasant *camaraderie* in vogue with smart people, whose wills are a law unto themselves.

Mrs. Brady did not smoke, neither did Zara.

Under cover of the bustle and chatter, the girl turned impetuously to her new friend.

"Will you have the goodness, *gnädige Frau*, to tell me who was the gentleman that did sit near you at the concert?"

"Near me? On my right, do you mean?"

"Right; *recht*. *Was ist?* I mean with fair hair, and the eyes—*das augen*, of so dark blue that look straight to one—as your own."

"I think you must mean my nephew."

"He—he is not of us now."

"No, he must have left after the concert was over."

The girl's brilliant face took on a shadow of regret. Mrs. Brady studied her curiously. Why had she singled out George among so many men, notable, and even handsome?

"I do not think he liked my songs of the second part," continued Zara. "I could see how his face alter. I wonder why?"

"I think George is not very—very musical," apologised his aunt.

"So," murmured Zara, turning away. Mrs. Vanderdecken was speaking to her, and amidst a babel of voices she suddenly learnt that Lord Chris was to recite something. Zara did not know what a recitation meant. Fate had been singularly kind to her.

Basil Warrender explained to Mrs. Brady that the recitation was the outcome of Chrissy's visit to the coster end of London, and was specially dedicated to her use at the forthcoming entertain-

ment. The announcement interested her, and she permitted Zara to drift away to the further end of the room, where Oscar Poseurenwitz was holding a small court, who were offering balm in Gilead to his wounded feelings.

Lord Chris rose from his chair, and between languid puffs of his cigarette thus addressed his audience :—

“Ladies and gentlemen, in offering to your notice this last effort of my (puff)—my vagrant fancy, I must inform you that I have for once forsaken the accepted canons of art. I have hitherto held that the artist should strenuously endeavour to keep his mind—empty. Empty of unimportant facts, and—useless knowledge. Genius, as I have before explained (puff)—genius is an angel that pays occasional visits to that furnished flat represented by our mental acquirements. If the rooms of this flat (puff) are overcrowded with furniture, there is, so to say (puff), no room for the angel; no vacant seat on which he may seat himself. Therefore it behoves us to give him at least seating accommodation. There are, however (puff), occasions—occasions when one must supply oneself with the—the substance of an idea. It is quite possible for a novelist to write a novel on a subject of which he has no knowledge whatever. Every day shows us the truth of this statement in the publishers’ lists. It is also a matter of (puff) comparative ease for

a poet to imagine the wind has a voice, that the clouds produce pictures, that the flowers relate picturesque fiction relative to love. Foolishness is essential to the poetic mind. That is why it is so rare ; for very few people have learnt the art of being foolish. It is a very difficult art, and can only be acquired by persons who have taken themselves—seriously. The art of being foolish is as difficult, in fact, as the art of making epigrams ; and quite as useful to society. To make what is called an epigram is really only to acquire the knack of putting any obvious truism into an opposite position. If you study the Book of Proverbs you can all become epigrammatic. People (puff, puff) are kind enough to laugh when I talk to them. I know perfectly well at what they are going to laugh before I say it. I know I am not really witty or really brilliant, but I know also that nothing would induce them to believe it. In fact, my friends, to be taken seriously you must be exceedingly foolish, and to be regarded as a fool you must be very, very wise (puff).

“But for fear of wearying you with explanations, I shall only say that, having carefully emptied my mind of anything likely to prejudice me, I adventured to that region of this vast metropolis (to quote the *Daily Telegraph*) which is only known vaguely to us as the East-End (puff). Occasionally I find that Society goes in for a sort of whitewashing. I'm sure I don't

know why it should want to whitewash' itself, but when it does feel that inclination it invariably organises a big charity. Sometimes the charity doesn't begin anywhere' near home, as in the present instance; it takes the form of a bazaar, or a concert, or a dramatic entertainment. Society then rouses itself, buys new and beautiful raiment, levies blackmail on a confiding public, and gives its ill-gotten gains to a noble object. The (puff) present noble object for which we are striving is to cheer some dreary East End evening of the poor and hardworked coster. In order to study him at his best I, as I said before, ventured on an expedition to his 'habitat', so that I might perchance find him at his worst.

"The coster is of two kinds—male and female. I hardly know which is (puff) the most objectionable. Put to the vote, I should, however, decide for the female. She is a lady whose tastes incline to tousled locks, marvellous hats, and frenzied plumage; also a verbal accomplishment she calls 'charf.' Her most noticeable characteristic is—her feet; and her voice is calculated to jar on the most unsensitive nerves (puff). But she has a moral nature as lofty as her headgear, a heart as large as her boots, and an aptitude for self-sacrifice so distinctive that it is little wonder she afforded me—inspiration; the inspiration which had led me to seek her with a mind empty and unbiassed. I will now recite that inspiration for your benefit (puff). The title,

ladies and gentlemen, of my recitation is simple and—unexplanatory. I have called it, 'She Wore a Single Dropper in Her Ear!'

"The audience will kindly refrain from asking for explanation during the progress of this composition—(puff), however unintelligible it may sound."

There was a pleased murmur of laughter, and a faint clapping of hands. Lord Chris was always so quaint. Still standing in the same position, one hand leaning lightly on the chair, he gave a glance at Zara, and then commenced his recitation.

"She didn't wheel a barrow, but a baskit she would carry
On 'er 'ead or on 'er arm, didn't seem to matter which;
Her shawl, 'twas rather ragged,
Her boots were large and jagged,
Her back hair—it was wot she called a 'switch.'
But 'twasn't her appearance—nor her hair—that took my fancy,
Nor her 'at—though that was most almighty queer;
'Twas one surprising thing
About her that I noticed—
She wore a single dropper in 'er ear.

"The mornin' might be fine or the mornin' might be dirty,
Rain, or fog, or sunshine, all throughout the year,
She'd be carryin' that baskit, all smilin'-like and cheery,
But she'd wear that single dropper in 'er ear.

"I thought it was percooliar, and puzzled much about it:
Two droppers it was usual to see;
And when she'd start a-torkin',
With her 'cadie' all so sportin',
I felt as 'ow she'd got the best ov me.
My! wasn't she a caution! And I couldn't get no nearer
To the settlin' of that mystery so queer
But I know'd her name was Ria,
And I thought I would inquir
Why she only wore *one* dropper in 'er ear.

" 'Twas Mother 'Awkins told me—'er as lives around the korner,
Near the pork-pie'shop, about a mile from 'ere ;
Bad she wer with the bronchitis,
And something called 'mangitis,'
And Ria got to know that she was queer.
And she nursed her like a hangel—
Wouldn't take a dime in payment,
But just parted with a dropper—from 'er ear.

" Now *that's* wot I calls charity, right sort, and no mistakin'—
Givin' up the sort o' thing she loved so dear ;
And a-goin' on as cheerful as if nuthink was the matter,
With just that single dropper in 'er ear.

" True gold it is, and hangin' in the pop-shop down our alley,
And there 'twill stick till better luck's a-near ;
There's times as Ria eyes it with a tear, but quickly dries it,
For she's still a single dropper—in 'er ear."

As Lord Chris concluded there was a rapid
exchange of glances.

No one quite knew how to take this quaint
composition. When he seated himself, however,
they began to applaud, led by Mrs. Brady, who
showed quite vivid enthusiasm, all the more in
that she had not the slightest intention of reciting
this remarkable poem herself.

XII

WHEN Mrs. Brady arrived at her flat it was nearly two o'clock in the morning. She let herself in with her key, and walked into the dining-room.

George was sitting there before the fire smoking. She uttered a cry of surprise.

"What's the matter?" she asked quickly, afraid of misfortune at so unprecedented an occurrence.

"The matter? Nothing special. I thought you'd have been home sooner, and I waited on; that's all!"

Mrs. Brady drew a breath of relief, and threw her cloak aside on the nearest chair.

"You gave me such a fright!" she exclaimed. "Why didn't you say you were coming back? And why didn't you stay supper? It was such fun, and done awfully well; all the same, I'll take a whisky and soda, as you've got it handy. I'm tired out. I had to listen to a coster recitation by Lord Chris. You never heard the like. It might have been Chevalier himself. George, do these people take themselves seriously? It puzzles me."

She applied the siphon to her tumbler, and then sank into a comfortable chair before the fire.

George Murphy turned a somewhat gloomy glance upon her handsome, animated face.

"They take nothing seriously," he said. "They look upon life as a vast masquerade, a Covent Garden fancy dress ball, a place for intrigues, assignations, and high-class fooling. Aunt, I'm sorry, 'pon my word I am, that you've got mixed up with this set."

She regarded him vaguely. "Why, George? I thought the other day——"

He rose impatiently and pushed back his chair. "Oh, the other day! That was different. To-night opened my eyes to many things."

Mrs. Brady laughed softly. "To-night? But you left after the concert. If you had stayed on and heard Lord Chrissy's speech and the coster recitation, I don't know what you would have said!"

His brow grew stormy. "Do you mean to go on with this? Or will you chuck it up, and continue to exist without their assistance?"

"I'm glad you said 'exist.' It's about all I ever managed to do. I really cannot understand you, George. What harm can these people do to me? Surely I'm seasoned to the ways of this wicked world by now. We thrashed all that out the other day. They afford me untold amuse-

ment; and Adèle seems very genuine. I've no fault to find with things as yet."

• "By the time you do begin to find fault it may be too late to withdraw," he said coldly. "Tar has a nasty trick of sticking, long after the gate we leant against has been left behind."

"You speak in parables, my dear boy," said Mrs. Brady, leaning back in her comfortable chair and glancing at his moody face. "Where's the gate, and where's the tar? And wherefore this sudden change in your own opinions? I thought there was to be a little mutual advantage gained by my first footing in this set. Heaven knows I've tried long enough to get over the gates! Why, it means presentation, social distinction, everything I want."

"Will these things come to a furnished flat in Mount Street? Will they lift your load of debts, or add to it?"

• "My dear! How dreadfully pessimistic! I tried to explain to you that I am accepted on my *own* merits, not for my position. And when I do return the hospitality or favours so freely lavished at present, I shall do it in a way that neither millionaires nor *parvenus* would attempt. Distinction is not learnt in a day, George, and money can't teach it. For goodness' sake don't be throwing cold water *now* on my efforts. Just when success promises, too."

Her voice was aggrieved, and she drank off her

whisky and soda in a determined manner that spelt business. Her nephew still continued pacing the room. His cigarette had gone out, but he seemed oblivious of the fact.

"You heard nothing, I suppose, of the future fate of that girl?" he asked suddenly.

"Girl!" echoed Mrs. Brady vaguely. "Oh, do you mean Zara Eberhardt?"

"Yes. For what do they destine—her?"

"She is Mrs. Vanderdecken's peculiar charge. And, as yet, I am not very *intime* in that quarter. Adèle is her chosen friend—at present."

"You say that as if you had intentions."

"So I have, George. I mean to oust her in Adèle's affections. But with regard to Zara, I have learnt very little. She will not sing in public again for some months, that I know. And I suppose Mrs. Vanderdecken will take her wherever she goes. You seem interested in the Wonder. Did you think her so lovely, as they all say?"

"I thought her the most exquisite piece of womanhood I have ever set eyes on."

Mrs. Brady's eyes went to his face; then they returned to the fire. A space of silence emphasised the fall of the embers. Her thoughts were busy, travelling to one conclusion over a winding road of deductions.

"I suppose she *is* very beautiful," she said at last. "But we must remember, George, she is only a half-wild gipsy, a waif of charity, brought

here and introduced as a freak on the part of Trottie Vanderdecken."

George Murphy made no reply. A wave of vague, half-stormy thoughts was sweeping over his heart; a wave that threatened to land him on a strange shore—a shore whose existence he had not credited. As yet he had never surrendered liberty of thought, or action, to any woman's power. No memory had lingered long enough to disturb or enthrall him, but to-night he could not shake off the spell of that one face with its lustrous eyes and scarlet lips. The sensuous charm of those passionate songs still echoed in his brain. He could not banish it. Was it prophetic of that phantom insanity at which he had so often laughed? The idea irritated him as it crossed his mind, while still he slowly paced the room and listened to Mrs. Brady's animadversions.

She talked on for talking's sake, watching his face from time to time as it approached the circle of light. She had never known George in such a mood, and was puzzled to account for it.

The chiming of the clock at last arrested her attention. She yawned, and rose from her seat.

"Really, I must say good night," she exclaimed. "Look at the time! And I have to do dozens of things to-morrow, or rather to-day. I must get six hours' sleep, or I'll be a perfect wreck. Are you going back to your rooms, or will you have a shakedown here?"

"I'll go back," he said. "Will you dine to-morrow with me at the Savoy? I've stalls for the new piece at the Piccadilly, if you'd like to come."

"Oh, Adèle has asked me to go with her; but wouldn't you dine us both, and go with us? Get hold of another man, Chrissy or Mr. Warrender, that'll make the party complete."

"I'll certainly not ask Chris. He's too utterly foolish, even for a play. I'll see about Warrender, though. He's the most decent of the lot, if only they don't ruin him. Good night, Aunt Per."

He kissed her forehead, and retired into the vestibule for his hat and coat. Mrs. Brady followed him to lock the outer door. Then she switched off the electric light and retired to her bedroom, where Eugénie was awaiting her, half asleep.

The maid had never known her mistress so silent. She could extract no information as to the supper, or any event subsequent to the concert. Her failures made her cross enough to administer several unnecessary tugs to Mrs. Brady's long thick locks as she brushed and combed them for the night. When dismissed, she congratulated herself on the idea that had led her to offer assistance to Fräulein Eberhardt.

But for that she would never have collected sufficient material for *The Wasp* ere it went to press.

In reality Mrs. Brady was seriously disturbed.

Her quick mind leaped from surmise to surmise. That George should fall in love with anyone so impossible as Zara Eberhardt seemed nothing less than a catastrophe under present circumstances. What was the use of beauty, even genius, in the wife of a struggling barrister? He ought to marry rank or wealth, and she had determined that he should do so. Adèle Beaudesart was the very wife for him. The slight scandal attached to her name was of no account nowadays when the divorced husbands and wives of one year, met quite amicably the next at the Carlton or Savoy supper-tables, with their new partners beside them.

Besides, Adèle was so rich and so generous. If, by some stupid freak on George's part, all her plans were to be upset? The idea was insupportable—almost as bad as nightmare. The only thing to do was to prevent any following up of this sudden attraction. Fortunately, Mrs. Vanderdecken was leaving early in the new year for Egypt. But the intervening time was long enough for danger, if—by any chance—George chose to pursue this most unfortunate fancy. Perhaps Mrs. Vanderdecken would not take Zara about with her? She seemed to have a curious jealousy regarding the girl.

It might be only the jealousy of the "discoverer," who is fully conscious of a treasure that will astonish the world. On the other hand, it might be that morbid, unaccountable jealousy

she had seen displayed by members of the *Vie Intime*.

Whatever it was, and whatever it meant in the future, it certainly disturbed Mrs. Brady's rest, and left her *distract* and unsocial when Eugénie appeared next morning with her tea and her letters.

XIII

ADELE BEAUDESART agreed with alacrity to Mrs. Brady's suggestion as to the dinner and amalgamation of couples, for the next night.

Both at table and in the stalls of the Piccadilly, Mrs. Brady found Basil Warrender a very entertaining companion. George also, seemed to have shaken off his mood of the past night, and paid Adele as much attention as might reasonably be expected of any man in an age that has almost discarded politeness.

A very fashionable crowd, up for the "little season," filled boxes and stalls; and greetings and gossip were quite the order of waiting intervals.

"There's Trottie in that box, and Chris with her; and she's brought the Wonder!" exclaimed Lady Beaudesart suddenly.

Mrs. Brady looked quickly at a box on the second tier, and saw the now familiar beautifully gowned figure, and worn, tired face. Zara was behind, dressed in the white gown she had worn at her concert. Involuntarily Mrs. Brady's eyes flashed to her nephew's face. It was warm, eager,

glad with the gladness that welcomes a desired presence. His glance had taken in the radiant beauty of the white figure that stood and gazed, wondering at the scene before her.

A moment, and their eyes met. Her slight inclination and the smile that touched the rose of her lips, said enough to content George.

He was surprised that his heart could beat so quickly. His eyes returned to the programme he held, but read no word printed there. A curious confusion of mind and thought took the place of his usual calmness. He had to rise to make room for late arrivals. Satins, and laces swept his feet. Once or twice a voice greeted him by name, and he answered as conventionality demanded, but it all seemed vague and indistinct. When darkness swept over the theatre and the curtain rose, it was not at the stage he looked, but upwards to where that gleam of white showed dimly against a scarlet curtain; upwards to where the rapt wonder of a girl's face looked forth from the darkness.

The play went on. He scarcely troubled himself to follow its action. The usual neurotic heroine, with the usual "past," gave utterance to the usual sublime discontent with nature, since nature had made her what she was. Yearned for the impossibility of re-creation, and did her utmost to spoil other people's lives in wordy paradoxes, and by indiscreet actions.

When the curtain fell to marked disapprobation from such parts of the house as constitute the critics and censors of modern playwrights, Lady Beaudesart rushed into a rapid dialogue with the young barrister.

"It's so horrid," she remarked, "to hear ignoramuses in the pit and gallery going on like that. Because *they* can't understand the subtlety of modern comedy, they would prevent us from hearing it. Instead of a Licenser of Plays we ought to have a Licenser of Audiences."

"But it's a mistake to fancy only ignorant people go to the pit and gallery," said George. "On such occasions as these quite a well-educated crowd wait with campstools and sandwiches before the doors. Wait for hours sometimes!"

"How extremely foolish," observed Adèle, "when they could come in on the second night without any waiting at all!"

"But that wouldn't be the same thing."

"You mean they wouldn't see *us*? Well, I suppose that would be a loss to the poor things. Still, I've seriously thought of asking managers to make the second night *the* night of the play. It would be better for many reasons. The actors and actresses wouldn't be so nervous, and the audience would escape the noise and vulgarity of the crowd."

"Since when has the 'voice of the multitude' "

become vulgar?" laughed Basil Warrender. "Don't you know that they are our real critics, our real judges, the only people who read and think, and have the courage to be honestly disagreeable?"

"As if *that* required courage," she answered.

"But it does," said Mrs. Brady. "No one likes a candid opinion. Even if its general outline is favourable, there's sure to be a lurking sting in the tail of it. Adèle, who's that with the pearls? No, the third tier; in blue. Her face seems familiar."

"It ought to be! Don't you know the new shoe shop in Maddox Street—Lady Victorine's? Well, she runs it."

"How funny it seems!"

"She was over head and ears in debt before she went in for trade. Of course, it's only the name. She doesn't really *do* anything."

"Do you want to go out, George?" asked Mrs. Brady, disturbed by her nephew's restless movements.

"No—o. At least I'd like a cigarette, but I suppose there won't be time. What do you say, Warrender?"

"According to programme, seven minutes, but being a first night——"

"Did you understand *what* it was she had done?" whispered Mrs. Brady to Adèle Beaudeart. "Mrs. Entredeux, you know, in the play."

"Seventh commandment, as usual. I wonder they don't try the second or the ninth for a change! Not spicy enough, I suppose. Did you ever think you would like to write a play, Perenna? I should think it would be lovely—the production, I mean. Of course, one would have to shut up the gallery and raise the price of the pit. It's intolerable to think of one's work at the mercy of such people as—those!"

Her glance swept to the red and grinning faces of the "gods" above.

"But you can't deprive the lower orders of their rights, my dear," said Mrs. Brady.

"Why don't they go to music halls, and circuses, and things?" said Adèle vaguely. "It's not possible they could understand a piece like this. I suppose not one of them know why that slipper was put outside Lady Revelton's door."

"Perhaps it's as well they should not understand such dramatic subtleties," laughed Mrs. Brady. "They might imitate us even more than they do. Adèle, isn't that Count Von Rasch—there, end of first row? I met him last season in Dublin."

"You won't meet him much this. He's dropped too much over baccarat. They say it was all through going to that Berkshire place; Mrs. Willie Gilson's. They do play so high there! The poor man has been quite ruined between them. I'm

so sorry for him. Don't catch his eye, my dear. I don't want to bring him on us. What's Trottie making those signs for? I wonder if it's me or, you she means. I expect it's about supper. Shall I ask Basil to go to her box after the next act?"

George leant forward, his colour slightly heightened. "Can I go for you, Lady Beaudesart? There's time enough, I fancy."

"Oh, if you would! And if it's about supper we're quite willing to make up a party. At least I am, and as for Per——"

"Where thou goest I will go," murmured Mrs. Brady smilingly.

"All right. What a hurry George is in! He's off already. And here's the orchestra back. I believe they meant seven minutes. Oh, well, he can stop in Trottie's box, I suppose, for the next act. There's a vacant seat, I see."

Mrs. Brady saw it too. And the vacant seat was by Zara—Zara, at whom many interested eyes and many opera-glasses were turning—Zara with her lovely face rendered lovelier by excitement.

"I wish he hadn't gone to that box," she thought petulantly. "What's the use of all my trouble on his behalf, if he goes and falls in love, with that gipsy? I beg your pardon, Mr. Warrender—you were saying——"

"I asked if you cared much about modern plays. Don't you think there's a strange family likeness between them?"

"I do. But there seems a demand for the supply."

"Imitation being the easiest form of flattery. We have passed manicure shops, and tea shops, and milliners' shops as a part of the architecture of the Temple of Art. I am anxiously looking out for a fashionable butcher's next."

Mrs. Brady laughed. "Candidly," she said, "I'd rather see the *School for Scandal* any day than the *pot-pourris* of French vice and English dulness which seem to constitute the new drama."

"Yet it attracts a highly intellectual audience," observed Basil Warrender.

"Lord Chris says the women come to see the frocks, and the men to find out hidden wickedness."

"I think the wickedness is patent even to a limited comprehension of the—indelicate. The last thing either dramatist or actor desires, is to be misunderstood."

"I wonder why that woman wore a diamond caterpillar on her left shoulder," said Mrs. Brady vaguely.

"Don't you know?"

Basil looked at her, and then at the stage. The curtain was rising. He did not explain the occult meaning of the strange ornament a leading actress had chosen to wear. He was asking himself, through the tedium of the second act, whether it

was possible that one woman in London was still comparatively guileless.

The play dragged on its weary maunderings towards the broad road that meant its own as well as its heroine's destruction. The slipper was kicked from the door of intrigue to the—accidentally—unlocked portal of Juvenile Virtue in the same corridor. This produced complications; then results. All the delicate machinery of *double entendres* came into play, and the gallery hissed and the pit booed in contradistinction to the plaudits of the smart set.

Amidst general noise and confusion the occupants of stalls and boxes gathered their wraps, and joined their parties, and retired to discuss old problems, in a new dress, over lobster salad and Chambertin and other supper delicacies.

George Murphy had remained all the time in Mrs. Vanderdocken's box. The message he had to convey to the trio below seemed of less importance than Zara's quaint remarks and bewildered excitement. He felt thankful that a limited knowledge of English made a great portion of the play unintelligible to her. When he left the box he, had promised to make one of the supper-party Mrs. Vanderdecken had invited to her own house. He managed to reach his aunt and Lady Beaudesart, and told them of the invitation.

"I was to say Mrs. Vanderdecken has some-

thing of special importance to tell us all," he observed.

She looked up quickly. "Oh, I'll come if *that's* true. What a crush! I declare my elbows feel as if they'd been put into Court mourning. Perry, dearest, do you hear?—Trottie wants us to go to her house for supper. Do you care?"

"I don't mind; anything you please," said Mrs. Brady gaily. "George, why didn't you come back? Shameful conduct to desert us! Mr. Warrender is looking for the carriage. Seems as if we'd never get away to-night. Are you going to Mrs. V.'s, George? I thought you didn't like her. Oh, very well, . . . you've changed your mind. Ah, there's Mr. Warrender waving to us. Yes, Adèle, I'm coming. Do we give the men a lift? Come along, then, George. Our dresses will stand a bit of crushing. Oh, there *is* Trottie and Lord Chris, coming down the stairs. George—my *dear* George, you're standing on my dress. Do attend to what I'm saying. Adèle's miles ahead. You look quite moon-struck!"

He stammered an apology, and piloted her through the crowd, who were now pushing and scrambling in all directions, lamenting the early closing of restaurants, and the lessening chance of procuring supper-tables.

The two carriages arrived almost simultaneously at Pont Street.

Adèle seized upon Mrs. Vanderdecken with the impulsiveness of true friendship.

“Trottie, what is it? Anything really up?”

“Wait—and, hear,” said Mrs. Vanderdecken oracularly. “I’ll announce it at supper.”

XIV

ONLY a small party assembled round the supper-table in the warm and artistically lit dining-room.

Mrs. Vanderdecken was charitable to complexions, and her charity carried out the proverb of beginning "at home."

"You must take things as you find them," she explained to her guests. "I had not planned this meeting at all. But I made up my mind to ask all of you whom I saw at the play. We'll have some boverine first to revive us. I won't tell you my news till you're fortified to bear it."

"Trottie is always wonderful!" murmured Lord Chris, seating himself next to Mrs. Gideon Lee, the unappreciated actress.

"Certainly we need some restorative after such a piece," she answered, accepting a miniature cup of boverine from the butler, who was assisting two maids to administer refreshment.

"It was atrocious. But to return to Trottie. She surely can't mean to spring another surprise on us so soon! It's not fair, really. No one has a chance in with her."

"The girl has had a short innings," observed Mrs. Gideon Lee, glancing to where Zara was seated at the end of the table. "What do you *really* think of her appearance, Lord Chris?"

"What do you?" he asked, wise enough never to speak truth of one woman to another.

"In itself—nothing remarkable; but it owes a great deal to her peculiar style of oddity. Of course, *your* song—well, you taught it, note by note, so Trottié said."

"Oh, that's an old story now. I've forgotten all about it," said Lord Chris indifferently. "Have some of this (I don't know what it is). It's absolutely divine."

"I'm afraid of indigestion; and I've to see a manager to-morrow morning."

"A part in prospect?"

"Yes; if I care. It's rather quaint. You know the young Earl of Brittlesea, who's just come into his estates?"

"Slightly. He's scarcely out of swaddling clothes."

"He's managed to give his nurses and guardians a considerable amount of trouble—in them! What he'll do out?"

"*Revenons à nos agneaux*," suggested Lord Chris. "Your engagement—prospective or otherwise—what has it to do with Lord Brittlesea?"

"He's crazy on theatricals. He's going to build a wonderful theatre at the Castle. But he

insists on writing his own plays and acting the principal parts. At least they say his secretary helps the writing. That's neither here nor there. He is going to produce a play that no actress will take part in, because he insists on playing leading lady. And—only that he may wear all his jewels! The manager wants me to do a boy. I've never taken such a part in my life."

"All the more reason you should," interpolated Lord Chris. "You'll bring originality to it as well as—I suppose . . . ?"

His look was a whisper.

"Oh, *they're* all right," said Mrs. Gideon Lee frankly. "Then you think I—*might*?"

"Decidedly. What do you fear?"

"Nothing, of course. Only—won't it be odd to reverse parts? Make love to a man dressed as a woman!"

"It's always done in pantomime," observed Lord Chris. "And pantomime is the only innocent recreation that the British public has never wearied of."

"Oh, but in pantomime they're both feminine," explained Mrs. Gideon Lee, with delightful vagueness. "That makes all the difference."

"You ought to thank the Fates for a chance of doing something that will *not* make all the difference," answered Lord Chris, drinking champagne with the frank acknowledgment of a thirsty soul.

"Heavens alive! Aren't we sick of replicas and

reproductions in art, in life, in ourselves? I am not thirty years of age yet, and I've known—everything. When I open my eyes in the morning it's with an insatiable regret that there's not a sin left worth sinning, nor a virtue worth beginning."

"I suppose I ought to feel shocked, but, you know, Lord Chris, I never have believed you were quite as—as——"

"As vermillion as I have been painted? Perhaps I'm not. My character has suffered so much from my friends that my enemies cannot but idealise me—in consequence."

"But about this part—should you advise——"

"My dear lady, no one asks for advice until they have made up their mind not to take it. I only give it when I'm not asked for it. You'd look delightful as a boy, I've no doubt, and act the part as no boy would ever dream of acting it. All this points to success. Grasp your nettle—I mean your engagement—while it invites you."

"Then I shall go to Brittlesea Castle?"

"I always knew you intended to do so."

"I think you are the most unsympathetic man I ever met."

"I never sympathise with anyone who isn't a sinner. You, my dear lady, have still the courage of all the unnameable virtues. You don't require sympathy; at least—not a man's."

She flushed a sudden scarlet that was natural enough to be unbecoming.

Lord Chris smiled and turned to his other neighbour, who chanced to be Mrs. Brady.

“And what do *you* think of the palmy days of the British drama?” he inquired.

“I think fig leaves were infinitely more respectable,” she answered.

“Have you heard of the next disciple?” he went on. “The new-fledged lordling who proposes turning his ancestral halls into a Theatre Royal back dining-room? As a rule our young nobility has gone to the stage for its *amourettes*, not its art. But in this instance the stage is to be—dishonoured! Life would really be unlivable if it were not for surprises.”

“Surprises like these make one almost envious of the next generation.”

“There’ll be none left for them,” said Lord Chris flippantly. “We have effectually banished youth. Fourteen is as unintelligent as forty. It will have outlived surprise and foregone expectation long before it has reached years of—indiscretion.”

“Do you always keep on saying these sort of things?” asked Mrs. Brady.

“Always. I can’t help it. I’m so glad you don’t speak correct grammar. No one does now in these days of board schools. Talking of schools, may I ask if you intend to give my coster recitation at the East End conversazione?”

“I think—not,” said Mrs. Brady. She was

annoyed at the familiar way he spoke to her. It takes time to get accustomed to rudeness, either in an implied or natural condition.

"I must get someone else, then," he said, quaffing another goblet of champagne. "But might I ask your reason?"

"I could never do it justice. You see, I was rash enough to promise before I had heard it."

"But my delivery was specially crude," he observed.

"I thought you had made a study from life."

"Oh no. I ordered a few of Chevalier's things from Chappell's, and then composed mine on the same lines. It's quite easy to do when you try."

Mrs. Brady looked at him, wondering if he was speaking the truth, or if his candour was the result of Trottie's champagne.

"But you pretended it was original," she said.

"Naturally. I never destroy illusions. They are the cayenne of life; the true essence of modern philosophy."

Mrs. Brady laughed outright. "I think it's very catching, this kind of talk," she said. "Do you know I actually find myself repeating it in my leisure moments, as an exercise in modern absurdity?"

"To be really absurd is the highest form of courage," said Lord Chris. "It demands the Victoria Cross."

"Who's talking about the Victoria Cross?" chimed in Mrs. Vanderdecken. "I only know one person worthy of it, and that's Tommy Sanderson."

"Why—what's he done?"

"He has married a woman ten years older than himself, and—grown a beard."

Several heads turned towards her.

"The riddle is still unanswered," said Lord Chris. "Neither fact strikes me as 'heroic.'"

"Don't you see? The beard added the ten years on to *him*!"

There was a general laugh, followed by a pause.

"Has the hour arrived for your revelations, Trottie?" asked Lord Chris suddenly. "We seem to have done justice to the frivolous business of eating and drinking. I confess my curiosity is stimulated."

"And mine," echoed round the table, as all eyes turned to their hostess.

Mrs. Vanderdecken swept the faces with a vague, wide smile.

"I expect I shall surprise you a little," she observed. "I was conscious of being almost equal to that sensation myself. Well, in order to put you out of suspense I will tell you the story at once. I have been left a fortune."

There was no doubt now as to interest and speculation. Even Lord Chris put down the glass

he was lifting to his lips, and looked at her with open eyes.

"A real fortune," she went on; "from an unexpected source. I only heard of it yesterday and spent this morning in a musty place called Lincoln's Inn, poring over deeds and signing things. An old uncle, whom I scarcely remember, has left me an estate in Cornwall and something like seventy thousand pounds. Now why I asked you all here to-night is to listen to a proposition of mine. I had intended going to Cairo after Christmas, but instead of that I propose that you should *all* come down with me and see me take possession of my new property. The house is called Weard Hall. It is a huge and very ancient place, and full of interest. It also possesses one distinctive charm—a haunted room."

"No . . . really? Bravo, Trottie! You've done very well for yourself," murmured Lord Chris.

"Now," continued Mrs. Vanderdecken, "we have all agreed there couldn't be such a thing as a ghost. It's too ridiculous to suppose it. Therefore I'm not going to ask, or let anyone tell me, *which* is the haunted room. And we'll all take an equal chance of occupying it. Only each of us must promise that, if we do see or hear anything supernatural, we will do our best not to discover *what* it is. Is that agreed?"

She looked round the oval table, and her eye

fell on George Murphy seated by Zara. The girl had been drinking in her words eagerly, not at all comprehending their full purport. George was regarding her, and had paid scant attention to the harangue.

Mrs. Vandierdecken's glance travelled slowly round the circle of attentive faces. Those of the *Vie Intime* seemed deeply interested. The outsiders apparently regarded the invitation on its own social merits.

"Delightful to think you've had such a stroke of luck, dear!" exclaimed Adèle Beaudesart. "But as to going to this moated grange in a body, won't it be—rather—rather inconvenient?"

For Adèle remembered other visits, and had a holy horror of draughts, damp rooms, and the general dulness of winter in country houses, unless sport or hunting was to be had.

"Inconvenient! Not at all. I'll send heaps of servants to get the place aired and in order. I believe there's an excellent housekeeper there. I thought you might all come down on Christmas Eve, and have a rattling good week of it."

"Christmas Eve!" observed Mrs. Brady. "Isn't that the night of the coster charity concert?"

"It is," said Lord Chris.

"Oh, we can put that off," said Mrs. Vandierdecken carelessly. "Any other night will do as well for them."

"But, my dear Trottie, you arranged with the people of the hall, and they gave up that date," exclaimed Adèle.

"Did I?" she murmured vaguely. "Well, I'll engage a conjurer or something, and send him down. They'll like that quite as much, I've no doubt."

Mrs. Brady thought it probable the people *would* like a conjurer much better, and find his entertainment more comprehensible than that proposed by the Cult. She refrained, however, from saying so. She was wondering whether Mrs. Vanderdecken's invitation was inclusive of the whole party, or only embraced her own mystic circle. Trottie never addressed *her*; neither did she seem particularly interested in her presence.

"So my coster inspiration will be wasted!" exclaimed Lord Chris pathetically.

Mrs. Vanderdecken's tired eyes rested languidly on him.

"Don't you think it's the things that they don't know about that they like best?" she asked. "A coster story to a coster is no novelty. You should tell him about the West End, or high art. I'm sure if you went to What's-his-name's recitals you wouldn't find a single coster there."

"That's true enough," said Lord Chris. "I shall, henceforward, bring the East to the West to be taught appreciation. And so you want us

all to go ghost-hunting, Trottie? That's quite a new departure."

"It ought not to be," chimed in Mrs. Gideon Lee fervently. "I, for one, believe firmly in 'ghosts. Lost souls, wandering souls, poor shades, seeking in vain for kindred sympathy."

"If we could only get out of our bodies for one day, and go about in *our* souls! How delightful!" said Adèle flippantly. "What a lot of discoveries we should make!"

"It is quite possible to make discoveries without going to *that* trouble," said Lord Chris dryly. "But here we are all off the track, and no one has congratulated Trottie. Let's drink her health, and pledge ourselves to install her as commander-in-chief of Weard Hall."

"And you'll all promise to come. You *won't* desert me?" entreated Mrs. Vanderdecken.

"We will never desert our dear Lady," said Lord Chris, rising to his feet and replenishing his glass. "All happiness be hers, and may it be her fate to offer us the sensation of a real Christmas ghost. She certainly deserves to be queen of the revels, and we will do our utmost to assist in them. A fortune is a prosaic, in-artistic thing. It is so possible for anyone to have a fortune left them. But it has its uses. Even if one throws it away, there might be someone about to catch it. I am not in my usual vein to-night. Devilled oysters and surprises do not

seem to—to agree very well together, and a ghost as an *entremet* has a certain mustiness about its flavour. Nevertheless, I should like to say that the pursuit of the occult has always had a strong fascination for me. To be able to conduct a search for the non-existent appeals unnaturally to the faculties of the—the existent. That Trottie is able to afford us such opportunities of investigation is on a par with all the other many wonderful things she might have done. As the poet says, ‘Egypt we have always with us, but ghosts are apt to be elusive.’ ”

XV

IT was late when the supper-party broke up ; and Mrs. Brady was conscious that champagne and liqueurs had evolved something of an orgie, from which she and George escaped in the smallest of the small hours.

Mrs. Vanderdecken had sent Zara away, and George had then suddenly become reminiscent of duty and hansom cabs.

"Shall you go to Cornwall?" asked Mrs. Brady, as they rattled through the dark, foggy streets.

"Trottie said *all* of us who were there."

"It depends on—on business," he answered.

"But no one does any business at Christmas-time," said Mrs. Brady.

"You will go, of course?"

"I should think so, indeed ! Why, it promises no end of fun—and experience."

He was silent for a few moments.

"Perhaps I'll try and run down," he observed at last. "What a lucky woman ! She was rich enough before, and now all this added to it."

"Indeed, it is a bit of luck. I could have done very well with even half seventy thousand. But

fortunes don't seem to come our way, do they, George? And she has no children either. Only herself to spend it on."

"Always the way," said George gloomily. "I suppose if I worked all my life I'd never make a quarter of that money."

"No. As I said, you'll have to marry it, my dear boy."

"I *won't!*" he burst out impetuously. "Aunt Perenna, I've made up my mind on that point. If I can't carve my own way to fortune, I'll not share anyone's."

"It sounds very nice and noble-minded," said his aunt. "But you must remember the years that such carving takes. And they have to be lived, and what's worse—paid for!"

"Oh, as if I didn't know *that*," he almost groaned. "Why do we always talk of money, Aunt Per? It's hateful! It creeps into everything. All life seems such a sordid business nowadays. A bargain for all we don't need, and discontent with all we possess. Sometimes I think I'll chuck the whole thing up—go to some place that's got a few wholesome, *clean* vices left. A primeval inheritance that the world of cities has passed unnoticed."

Mrs. Brady made no reply for a moment. She was always a little alarmed when George talked like this. She loved him as much as if he had been her own son; and to help him to a good

position in life had been always her dearest ambition. It would be one of the ironies of Fate if he chose to throw everything up at the very moment when success loomed on the horizon. Surely he would never do such an utterly idiotic thing as he had threatened!

She touched his hand gently as it lay on his knee. "You mustn't talk like that," she said. "I don't believe things are as bad as they look. Now we know these people, they'll exert their interest if we go the right way to work. You'll be a famous man yet, George."

"There may be a price too high to pay for such fame," he muttered, looking out at the gloomy night and the gloomy streets through which the man was driving. "Aunt Per, a longing comes over me sometimes to meet men, live with men, learn of men, who aren't all gambling, betting, well-groomed, idling tom-fools! To get away from this accursed London and its social obligations. Away from show, and lies, and pretence, and—women!"

"George, my dear boy, what *has* happened to you?"

He gave a short, harsh laugh. "I don't know. Perhaps it's recovery from moral blindness. Once I was blind, now I see."

"You talk as if you'd had a disappointment. Surely Adèle——"

"Oh, pray put that question aside. Your

schemes on my behalf are useless, Aunt Perenna. Lady Beaudesart is the last of the many possible, or impossible, women you have had designs upon."

"I'm sorry for that," said Mrs. Brady gravely. "She's really the best of the bunch. Perhaps when you know her better, see her amid different surroundings——"

"No, no!" he exclaimed impatiently. "She's altogether impossible."

Mrs. Brady thought of Zara, and her heart grew troubled. She was too wise, however, to say anything on the subject. Better to ignore a danger than allude to it.

She was relieved when the hansom stopped at Mount Street. George would not come in; he kept the cab and drove to his rooms in a mood that was an odd mixture of hopelessness, longing, and disgust.

Mrs. Brady went straight to her room. She found Eugénie sitting by the fire reading a Society journal, which she put down with elaborate carefulness as her mistress entered.

"I'm dreadfully late, and oh! so tired," murmured Mrs. Brady, sinking into the low, deep chair before the fire. "I went to supper at Mrs. Vanderdecken's, after the theatre. Fancy, Eugénie, she's had a large fortune and estate left her! Was there ever such luck? She was wealthy enough before, and now *this* added to it."

"Sure, ma'am, don't they say the devil always

looks after his own?" answered the maid, as she loosened her mistress's wraps and commenced to unfasten her evening gown. "I've been reading many queer things about these some ladies in that paper there, ma'am. There's a description, too, of the concert at Lady Beaudesart's, and your name's mentioned, ma'am, I'm glad to see."

"Is it really? Show me the paper, Eugénie."

"I will, ma'am, if you'll first let me get them *corsettes* off you, and slip you into your dressin'-gown. You can be readin' it while I'm brushin' your hair."

Mrs. Brady took her advice, and plunged into a column of *The Wasp*, while Eugénie unwound the heavy waves of her dark hair and smiled as one well-pleased over her shoulder.

"Dear me!" exclaimed Mrs. Brady suddenly.

"This is a very exact description. And how did it get into a paper? Adèle told me there wasn't a newspaper man admitted!"

"Ah, sure, them's the mysterious things that be happenin'," returned Eugénie. "Maybe it's private people as does the reportin'; one can never tell. But they're grand wurrds, ma'am, about yourself. 'Mrs. Perenna Brady, the handsome Irish widow, who has frequently graced the London season, and is a well-known personality in Dublin Society, was also presint'! 'What could you have better? And the description of your gown! And then lower down—'Mrs. Per-

enna Brady was seen driving through Bond Street with Lady Bowdysart *ong route* to luncheon."

"You seem to know it all by heart, Eugénie?"

"Sure, ma'am, what was I to do all the long hours of the evenin'; but be reading of your doin's in Society? I said you'd be named with the best of them, and me words is true for once."

"I—somehow I think Mrs. Vanderdecken won't like this description of Zara to have leaked out," murmured Mrs. Brady, half to herself.

"The foreign young lady, is it?" chimed in Eugénie. "Sure, and she's a beauty, and the voice of her, why 'twould melt a pavin'-stone. 'Twould have been a sin and a shame if she hadn't had a friend at Court to tell the fashionable news-people of her jaynius and her beauty."

Mrs. Brady looked quickly up. "Eugénie, I hope these scandal-buyers haven't been trying to get hold of you? It's a well-known fact that every notable household has its paid Press-spies. That's how so many improper things get into the newspapers."

"You don't say so, ma'am. Well, now! The wickedness of the world! Who could believe it? Perhaps, then, 'tis Lady Bowdysart's people that's to blame for such information."

"But they wouldn't know anything about *me*—and Dublin."

"And why shouldn't they? Sure, your name's been in the best Irish papers scores and scores of

times, and since Lady Bowdysart's so uncommon friendly with you, mightn't she be passin' the wurr'd to her maid same as yourself does on occasions, ma'am? Ah, there's many wheels in wheels of the *bong mond*. Not that I'd be sayin' a wurr'd against it. But I'm glad with all my heart, ma'am, that you've got among the right people at last."

Mrs. Brady let the paper slide to the floor. Her thoughtful eyes met the reflection of their own thoughtfulness in the mirror.

"The right people," she said to herself. "Are *these* the right people? And even if so, what better or happier am I for, their notice? My ambition was less for myself than for George, and he doesn't seem to set any value on it—now."

Her eyes fell again on the journal, with its flashy cover and multitude of advertisements. "Thank goodness, my ambition never leant in that direction! How vulgar and poor it seems! One's name in a list of other names; one's dress in a crowd of other dresses; one's appearance at the impertinent mercy of—nobodies, who bribe or buy private information. Can anything be more vulgar; in worse taste?"

In a sudden spasm of anger she picked up the paper and tore the offending page to pieces, and then threw them into the fire.

Eugénie almost dropped the brush in consternation. The pride of injured genius spoke out in reproachful accents.

"Whatever did you do that for, ma'am? And such beautiful writin' as it was. I'd thought ye'd be as pleased as meself over it!"

"As—yourself!" Mrs. Brady wrenched her hair from the maid's hands and faced round with blazing eyes. "Eugénie, if you've had anything to do with this business, I'll—I'll dismiss you from my service. It's vulgar, it's ostentatious, it's impertinent in the highest degree! Tell me, did *you* give the information about the concert, the people, the dresses? I remember how anxious you were to be at Lady Beaudesart's, but if I thought——"

"Sure, ma'am, don't ye be thinkin' any such things. Is it likely I'd take to purfessional journalism, even if I had the talint? Don't ye know yourself I hate even letter-writin'?"

But her colour was slightly heightened, and her voice seemed less convincing than apologetic.

"Well, whether you've had anything to do with it or not," said her mistress, "be warned for the future. I'll have no backstair information given about myself, and my doings, and my friends. That's not my idea of social success. Anyone can get into the papers who chooses. The greatest distinction is to keep out of them."

Eugénie disentangled an obstinate tress in discomforted silence.

"It's disgraceful! I call it libellous!" continued her mistress, now in a thoroughly bad temper. "How any decent person allows it I can't

imagine!" She picked up the paper again, and glanced over its opening paragraphs.

"With such congenial spirits as Lord and Lady de J——, the K.'s, and Lord Herbert V. T——t, the Prince of W. could not but enjoy his stay at Quille House. High play was the order of the evening.

"A SOCIETY HOSTESS.

"The Countess H——, better known as 'Lady Georgie,' has written some notable articles on sport. She has gained celebrity as a 'whip,' and her house-parties are well qualified to be called 'sporting.'

"SMART SAYINGS.

"Some of the smart set are noted for wit as well as diamonds. Lady T—— recently defined a dyspeptic as 'a person with an optimistic digestion'! Needless to say, the table was convulsed with laughter.

"A PROMISING RADICAL.

"Mr. Reggie McTartan is a very young and promising member of the Opposition. He lives chiefly on porridge and boiled mutton, and is never seen with any jewellery on his person save a Cairngorm pin that was an especial favourite of his great-grandmother. He makes a special study of politics, and can state a case with remarkable force and clearness—in a strong Scotch accent. He is likely to be heard a great deal this session—though, perhaps, not understood.

"A CLEVER MINIATURIST.

"Mrs. Geraldine Messer has quite a clever trick of miniature-painting. She is a great favourite with Royalty, and recently executed three miniatures of the young Princesses of A. They were quite charming, and their parents, who had been on a prolonged tour, were much gratified at receiving such a welcome surprise on their return. Needless to say, the young sitters were also highly flattered.

"ROYAL TASTES.

"The Royal Household is well looked after in the matter of cream, butter, and bread. Dairy-work is almost a passion with the young Princesses, who can pat a pound of butter in the famous blue-tiled dairy with anyone not strictly professional. Perhaps a long acquaintance with the Isle of Wight is responsible for this attachment to Cowes!

"[N.B.—The Editor declines any responsibility in this witticism.]

"A SHOCK FOR ROYALISTS.

• "An authentic statement has been made by the Blue Lily League, to the effect that the true Queen of England is Mary IV. of Scotland. Also that, out of five hundred English peers only seventy-two are qualified to sit in the House of Lords. This League is trying to restore Jacobite peerages, and two obscure Irishmen are claiming the Earldoms of Limerick and Tyrconnel!"

This was the finishing touch for Mrs. Brady. She threw the journal into the fire.

- “Never let me see that *rag* in my house again!” she exclaimed. “And remember, Eugénie, if ever I have reason to suspect you of giving private information to these gatherers of Society garbage, the penalty will be instant dismissal from my service.”

Poor Eugénie promised with a fervour that owed a great deal to a guilty conscience, and the hurt *amour propre* of an author who hears a perfectly candid criticism.

XVI

TROTTIE VANDERDECKEN'S supper-party was a potential instrument in the fate of Mrs. Brady.

Unknown to herself, she was put to the vote when individual invitations were on the point of issue. Mrs. Vanderdecken felt that it behoved her to be careful in the matter of selection. No external element of criticism must intrude upon the sacred liberty of the *Vie Intime*.

"*Moi—je suis le droit*" was the motto of the occasion, and fluttered in the cryptic signs of letters exchanged on the subject.

Mrs. Vanderdecken chose to have a personal interview with Adèle Beaudesart, who had the casting vote in the matter.

"Come? Of course she must come!" exclaimed that lady. "Why shouldn't she? Besides, you asked her."

"Not—personally. You brought her to supper after the theatre, and I had to give a very general invitation then. I have been going over the list very carefully. It would never do to have a jarring note. I want this to be a *specialty* liberative event."

"Perenna is the last person to make herself disagreeable in any way. She is the *dearest* thing! I quite love her. Never out of temper, never bored, always ready to help, or advise, or be made use of. And such good company, too!"

"I've not found her so—yet," observed Mrs. Vanderdecken. "And I hate the way she looks at one. So impertinent, so—so critical; just as if she was laughing all the time in her sleeve."

"Does anyone ever really laugh in their sleeve? It must be an uncomfortable performance. Don't you wonder, Trottie, who invented proverbs? We are sadly in want of new ones. I was trying to invent some the other day. It's harder than you think. They've such a family resemblance to things said by Dr. Watts and Shakespeare."

"I wish you'd pay attention to me," said Mrs. Vanderdecken crossly. "The idea of talking about Shakespeare when no one with any pretension to culture believes *now* that he wrote any of those plays! Is this Perenna, as you call her, likely to interfere with us—in any way?"

"Do you mean is she shockable? I really don't know—yet. I've not had any opportunity of judging."

Mrs. Vanderdecken's eyes ~~flushed~~ ^{flashed} a question ere the tired lids drooped once more. "What is the new rôle?" she asked slowly.

"I haven't any at present; that's why I enjoy

Perry's society. She's so perfectly natural. She actually says what she thinks—on occasions."

"That must be a novelty," said Trottie dryly. "But also it is exactly what made me ask you if she is to be trusted."

"More than George, I think."

"George!" Mrs. Vanderdecken started. "I had no intention of asking George."

"Why? Are you afraid he'll fall in love with Zara?"

"Not at all," said Trottie coldly. "I shall take good care to prevent *that*."

"Is she to be one of the house-party?"

"Of course. But I shall only let her appear after dinner, and not for long."

"Poor girl!"

"She is devoted to her studies," said Trottie sharply; "and perfectly happy with her piano and her books."

"How wonderful!"

"It's very natural. She's not like our Society girls at all."

"That's something to be thankful for! But how we do depart from our 'shop'! The plain truth is, then, Trottie, if you want me you must ask Perenna also. I'll not face the vague horrors of a country house I've not heard of, or seen, without some protecting power."

"If I ask her, I must ask George," said Trottie gloomily.

"He won't do any harm."

"He'll not amalgamate."

"I thought Chris——"

"That's all over, so he says. He seemed quite squiffy. Shuts himself up in chambers and works, and never borrows money."

Adèle laughed. "Perhaps that's his aunt's good influence. She's quite equal to making converts."

"I confess I'm a little afraid," continued Trottie vaguely. "Will you promise to look after her if she comes?"

"Most certainly I will. Pray don't excite yourself in the matter. What's the house like? Have you any idea?"

"Not bad. I haven't been there for years. I must run down a couple of days in advance, and see to everything."

"Cornwall is a long way off, isn't it?"

"Not quite as far as Petersburg. I think seven hours will get you through."

"And is it really true about a haunted room, or did you only invent that? It's—useful, isn't it?"

"It's really true, so I've heard. But that won't interfere with the usefulness."

Lady Beaudesart began to laugh. "When I stayed at Beeve Hall," she said, "there was a ghost who used to walk the corridor in a dressing-gown. I saw it—once."

"Were you alarmed?"

"No; I think it was the other way about."

"Well, I must be going," said Trottie, stretching a languid hand for her furs. "I've such heaps of things to do."

"But you won't forget Perenna?"

"No; if you vouch for her being all right. By the way, Adèle, I had a paper sent me this morning, an odious, trashy thing called *The Society Wasp*. It had a full account of Zara's concert, and the change of dress and everything. Now *how* did that leak out? You promised there shouldn't be a Press person at it."

"No more there was, so far as I know. I can't imagine how any paper could have got hold of it. I wouldn't even send *Truth* or *The World* a Press ticket."

"Oh, this was some newly started rag," said Mrs. Vanderdecken viciously. "And the creatures said you had 'some good diamonds on.' Fancy, a person who wouldn't know the Koh-i-noor from a Gophir crystal, *daring* to patronise our jewels!"

"It's invariably done. I don't see how we can stop it," said Adèle. "Of course, *we* don't pay any attention, so it doesn't really matter. Point of fact, the other night I wore pearls, not a single diamond."

"Talking of jewellery, have you observed that your friend Mrs. Brady never wears any? Not even an Irish diamond."

"She doesn't like jewellery," said Adèle. "She

thinks it barbarous, hanging ourselves with stones and baubles. And certainly jewels couldn't improve her neck and arms. They're perfect."

"Quite a case of Cæsar's wife," said Mrs. Vanderdecken, drawing her trailing skirts towards the door. "Well, I'm doing this to please *you*, mind. I don't know why I have misgivings, but I have! I'm sure she doesn't like me."

"But Chris votes for her, doesn't he?"

"Oh yes. He says she's rattlin' good fun."

"And a rattlin' good figure, too," observed Adèle, who had no admiration for the attenuated slenderness of Trottie's frame.

Mrs. Vanderdecken made another pause at the door. "I've an idea! Suppose it was she who wrote that notice for the paper?"

"My dear Trottie, how you do worry over that notice! You ought to be seasoned to such things after all we've had said about us. But I'm perfectly sure Perry is innocent. She has a holy horror of what she calls Press garbage."

"People very often pretend to dislike a thing in order to throw off suspicion."

"Shall I ask her?"

"Really, Adèle, you grow positively childish. To ask such a question would only mean a denial. It's not likely she'd confess. Remember that Arthurson woman who went everywhere last season, and gave us all away in all the Society papers. Not a soul dreamt she was a journalist,

and she got asked everywhere because old Lord Gorrington took her up. Said her husband had been his *aide*, or secretary, or something in India., Well, he *had* to drop her, that's one comfort. They say she lives by writing for a syndicate now."

"Is this all *à propos* of Perenna?" asked Adèle Beaudesart.

"No, oh no! I fancy she couldn't write. She talks too much. Writers are the worst conversationalists in the world, unless you let them talk about their own books; but I really *must* go, Adèle. Some of those law people are coming to lunch, and I suppose I shall have to sign more papers. The signing of papers is the fulfilling of the law. Such a bore as it all is!"

"Seventy thousand is worth a little boredom. What an income you'll have now, Trottié! Shall you marry, do you think?"

"I—thank you, no! I've had enough of matrimony. Men are either bores, or brutes. The first are too good to live with, and the second too bad. No—I shall never marry again. The only way to endure men is not to see too much of them."

"But I thought Chrissy——?"

Mrs. Vanderdecken flashed an angry glance at her friend's face.

"Chrissy! Well, of all the impossible!—Have you taken leave of your senses, Adèle? He has

nothing but debts and epigrams. I don't mind paying a few of the one for sake of the other. "But marriage—what a very grotesque idea!"

She did leave then, and Adèle laughed softly as the door closed. "Poor dear Trottie!" she said. "Really, she grows more and more peculiar. What a mercy she's so rich that no one dare say anything against her!"

The door opened again, and a stately young footman in black shoulder-knots and silk stockings announced—"Herr Oscar Powder-and-Wits."

"My *dear* Oscar! Where have you been all these ages? I haven't see you since the concert. What's the matter? You look as gloomy as if you'd been to your own funeral!"

"I think I have, Lady Beaudesart," said the genius in a sepulchral voice.

He sserted himself on a chair, and drew a flashy-covered journal from his coat-pocket.

"The death of my hopes, the funeral of my artistic ambition," he went on, with deeper and deeper gloom. "You who promised to be my friend; you whom I revered as goddess, and benefactress—you have murdered me!"

"I!—murdered you! Good gracious, boy, what *do* you mean?"

"Read," he said, with a stony glare at the wall-paper, and flourishing an open page towards her. "Read—and then tell me could the heart of man or woman conceive anything more cruel!"

The page contained a marked paragraph. Lady Beaudesart took it eagerly, and ran hasty eyes over the words.

They ran to this effect :—

“In the interval of the two parts a new pianist (who is never likely to be heard again) endeavoured to entertain the fashionable and cultured audience by a feeble performance on the pianoforte. His choice of Chopin’s B Flat Minor Symphony was a very unfortunate one, it being far beyond his powers of interpretation. We understand he is the *protégé* of a certain fashionable lady who considers genius may be found even in the Mile End Road. The professional name of this musical failure is Herr Oscar Poseurenwitz.”

Lady Beaudesart threw the paper down and commenced to laugh.

“It’s too bad,” she said. “But why would you play a funeral march instead of those dear little twirly-giggy things you can do so well? I told you people wouldn’t listen.”

“Their listening or not listening is of no importance,” said Oscar loftily. “I consider you have taken an unfair advantage of me. You distinctly said no Press people or critics would be there. How, then, could this information have got into this—thing?”

He looked venomous contempt at the brilliant *Wasp*, whose sting had so severely hurt his *amour propre*.

"I'm sure I don't know!" exclaimed Adèle. "I never asked a person who had anything to do with journalism, and I know Mrs. Vanderdecken didn't. She was just as angry as you about Zara Eberhardt's name getting into a paper. I shall make inquiries. The concert was strictly private. As much so as an 'At Home.' It's most annoying. You had some tickets, by-the-by; to whom did you give them?"

"Only to artists like myself who are doing the System. And . . . er . . . besides, I found out they didn't come."

"*That falls through, then.*"

Her suspicions went, in spite of herself, to Mrs. Brady. Could it be possible she had done this as a joke? She had often made fun of poor Oscar and his affectations. But yet, could she be so merciless as to expose him to public ridicule?

"Leave me that paper," she said, "and don't look so miserable. You'll have lots more chances of appearing. I'll try and get to the bottom of this. It looks somewhat spiteful."

"Oh, I have many enemies," said the genius, with returning cheerfulness. "Many who envy me and would rejoice at my failure. They may have plotted, bribed. Heaven only knows what they may have done. Could this possibly be contradicted, or apologised for, my dear lady?"

"I'll do my best to find out," said Adèle. "I shall drive to the office after luncheon and insist

on seeing the editor. He must tell me from whom he got his information, or I'll threaten a libel action."

"Oh, please don't let it go so far," pleaded the victim to criticism. "I should have to appear in my own defence, and I could not, even for your sake, dear lady, I could not face the ordeal of a public court of injustice. The desecration of my art would indeed be complete. Heavens! Why, they might even ask me to perform before the jury. Picture to yourself—I—the bond-slave of individuality called upon to interpret my masterpieces before grocers and butchers and petty artisans, whose only musical knowledge consists in recognising 'God Save the Queen' because people stand up, or take their hats off."

"You are getting almost as amusing as our dear Chrissy," laughed Lady Beaudesara. "Rest in peace, however. I'll not let matters go as far as a County Court summons. Those newspaper people are always terrified of a libel action, and this rag seems very new—only the second number. Well, it won't be my fault if it ever sees a third. Come and have some lunch, Oscar, and do try and look more cheerful. We're all tarred with the same brush. They've patronised my jewels, so I hear. What do they say about Zara?"

"Oh, *she's* all right," murmured the aggrieved one. "That's what's so spiteful. She gets all

the praise, and then they dare,—*dare* to say I'm no artist."

“Perhaps in contradistinction to Zara you're *not*—in the eyes of *The Wasp*. A Press mind is the most curiously biassed thing in the world. There's the gong. Come along and drown your sorrows in the flowing bowl. Oh, I forgot, you don't touch the flowing bowl. Well, try an Apollinaris tabloid in hot water. Wasn't that the last thing recommended by the System?"

XVII

ADÈLE drove to the editorial offices of *The Wasp* after luncheon, leaving Oscar Jones, consoled by food and strange beverages, to the solitude of the music-room and the soothing company of cigarettes.

A watchful official in the outer office had seen the carriage and liveries draw up before the entrance. He announced it to his principal briefly as, "I say, here's a swell, sir; tip-top. What shall I say?"

"Members of the British aristocracy *can* learn the same lesson as other folk," remarked the young editor nasally. "Let them wait."

"A lady, sir; alone, coronet on the carriage."

"My rules are the same for all. In this case, however, five minutes instead of ten."

The youth retreated, and in due course shouted, "Come in!" to Adèle's knock.

She stood in the doorway holding her skirts in one hand; her brilliant, impertinent eyes swept the office with a rapid glance.

"Is this the office of *The Wasp*?" she asked sharply.

"Yes, ma'am," answered the boy, surveying her with admiration, and breathing in the scent of violets as she moved forward.

"I want to see the editor. Take him my card."

She laid it on the desk.

The youth rose. "I'm afraid he's very busy just now, madam. But I'll ask if he can see you."

"Can? He *must*. Say it's imperative. No, won't sit down. I must see him at once."

The youth took the card and went into the inner office.

He returned in a moment. "Will you walk this way, madam? Mr. Topham Hall will see you."

Then he ushered her in, closed the door, and applied his ear to the keyhole.

Lady Beaudesart had worked herself into such a rage at the injustice done to her favourite that she merely glanced at the young editor, and laid her copy of *The Wasp* down on his desk, open at the marked paragraph.

"Are you responsible for this—stuff?" she asked angrily.

The very young editor surveyed her with the gaze of one who has had a long education in the concealment of feelings.

"This is my journal—certainly. It has already a circulation of——"

"I don't want to know anything about the circulation! I wish to ask *who* is responsible for

this most impertinent paragraph. This libel on a personal friend and true artist!"

The very young editor felt his ears tingle, but maintained a transatlantic composure. His eyes glanced over the sheet.

"My information is perfectly authentic, Marchioness," he said, laying the paper down. "To what do you object?"

"To the whole thing!" exclaimed Adèle angrily. "This concert was a private affair. No Press people were invited; no criticism desired. I want to know how you procured this information."

He smiled. "I calculate this journal's going to hum," he observed. "My information comes from a perfectly authentic source. I—am quite satisfied with its truth."

"I hope you will be equally satisfied with the results. I am going from here to my lawyers, and I shall put the matter in their hands. It's an infamous libel. I consider that your whole journal teems with gross impertinence. It is quite time someone put a stop to this sort of thing. It passes all bounds of decency and restraint!"

She turned towards the door with a rapidity that led to a slight skirmish with the furniture in the adjoining office.

"Stop!" cried the editor imperatively. "Stop, madam! This matter's got to be settled up before you leave this office. Newspapers do *not* reckon

with fine feelings or fine names. They want to thrash out the truth. You accuse me of libel. Remember, madam, this is a country where the liberty of the Press is absolutely recognised. Where high treason *can* flourish disregarded on the notice boards of daily papers! Now, everything in my paper can bear verification. See? You *did* give this concert. You *did* employ these artistes. You had two hundred invited guests. Among them was it impossible one or more might furnish information?"

"Not one of my guests would ever stoop to furnish the columns of such a paper as *this*, with information."

He laughed unpleasantly.

"Well, if there's anything you Society ladies *won't* do if you're paid for it, the knowledge hasn't come *my* way. How do you suppose fashionable news *gets* circulated? Why, by yourselves, of course. You just love notoriety, whatever you pretend. As for libel, I'd *advise* you to think twice before you have *The Wasp* up for *that*. It *can* sting. There's a deal about your set that wouldn't bear daylight. Besides, the columns aren't *a* bit more personal than any of the other Society papers. Just you look here——" (He pointed to a pile of well-known journals.) "Don't they give you away just the same? Your dresses, your jewels, your parties, your friends, your royalties, your politicians! And all the rest——"

"They don't intrude on our *private* entertainments, or dare to criticise our artistic friends in the uncalled-for manner you have done."

"Don't *they*? Just you read *The Boudoir*, and *The Flashlight*, and *The Free Sword*, and *The Looker-On*, and heaps more. You'll find they've all the very same 'pars.' There must be a considerable amount of truth flying about or we couldn't *all* get hold of it."

"Truth!" echoed Adèle scornfully. "I suppose you bribe our footmen and our maids, and consider their information authentic. Well, I have determined to put a stop to it. My friends and myself are so indignant at these falsehoods and—personalities, that we intend to make an example of one of these—rags!"

"Rags!" The very young editor crimsoned to his eyebrows. "Excuse me, Marchioness, but your words are quite as libellous as my 'pars.' As I said, this is a free country, and the Press is granted *the* fullest liberty to express opinions or criticisms. I've learnt journalism in a good school. I guess I don't want to be told how far I can go, and what I can't say. I've edited one of the most important journals in the United States, madam, and I'm not afraid of your British aristocracy. My columns will speak frankly, and speak the truth. I am not to be bribed by rank and coronets, madam. I appeal to intelligence——"

"And curiosity," interrupted Lady Beaudesart.

"Curiosity of the vilest description, whose pennies you cater for."

"Don't get riled again, Marchioness. You've stated your opinion, and I've done the same. I maintain I'm *in* my rights, and I'll vindicate *the* freedom of the Press *to the* last farthing in my possession."

"You are not perhaps aware that you will have to give your authority for every statement I and my friends challenge."

Mr. Topham Hall looked somewhat disturbed. How would Eugénie serve in this affray? And what sort of harm or good would a legal action do *The Wasp* in these early days of buzzing? Sometimes a journal, bounded into fame by free advertisement of its daring, but also there was another side to the question. Sometimes the law dealt hardly and unexpectedly with tactless offenders. Although Mr. Topham Hall had come over to this old and behind-the-times country to show it a "thing or two" in journalism, there was just a chance that want of capital could not compensate for lack of prudence. He might, unknowingly, have overshot the mark of what is allowable, and gone "plumb" for the bull's-eye of what is—not.

These thoughts flashed with electric swiftness through his brain, as he looked at the haughty, angry face of his first distinguished visitor.

"If your ladyship would only take a seat and

let us discuss the matter," he suggested at last. "Would an apology in our next issue meet your views?"

"Certainly not." Nothing but a distinct withdrawal of the whole paragraph and a statement that it was absolutely untrue. Besides this, I must have the name of your informant."

"Out of *the* question! Against *all* etiquette of journalism. Our correspondents are sacred. Journalism, madam, is to the private informant what the seal of confession is to the Romish priest. We dare not divulge confidences."

"But that's just what you *do*!" exclaimed Adèle. "You divulge it openly, scandalously, even if it's untrue."

"I challenge you to point out a word of untruth in these 'pars,'" returned the young editor. "Did you have a concert at your private residence in Park Lane, or did you not?"

"Of course I did, but——"

"Excuse me, madam, you are now justifying *my* knowledge. Did a new female professional singer appear at that concert?"

"I never denied the particulars of the concert. I said——"

"Did that young foreign female dress in two different costumes for the two parts of this concert?"

"Oh, dear me, will you listen——"

"Madam, *I* am the interrogator now, and I

have my own rights to vindicate. The public eye is upon me and the public ear is open for any information I can give it. *The Wasp* is young, but its sting, madam, is barbed by experience and poisoned with truth."

"With untruth, I should say," returned Adèle. "And—judging from that pile of journals by your side and that scissors I see sticking out from underneath them, I should say that any information that wasn't untrue was stolen from other people!"

"Your words, madam," said the young editor loftily, "are the purely irrational outpourings of an irate female mind. You came here in anger. You have made many rash and insulting statements. Supposing I called upon you to prove them, what then, madam? The light of the law can illumine the unjust as well as the just. It is a light that pierces through the satin and lace of aristocratic apparel as effectually as the cotton and cloth of—of humbler individuals. Not that any one individual should class itself as humbler than another. I come from a land where all are equal—except millionaires. I came here determined to throw the searchlight of inquiry upon everything in the social circles of your British aristocracy. I wished to arouse the Lion from his lair. I am proud to think I have awakened the Lioness instead!"

Adèle Beaudesart's anger evaporated in a sudden

fit of mirth. Oh, that Trottie, that one or any of the Cult could hear this delicious bluff!

She suddenly seated herself on the chair she had refused, stifling her laughter with a useless scrap of cambric edged with *Duchesse* lace (which the young editor described afterwards as "point d'Angleterre").

"It's my turn now to cross-examine you," she said. "Hand me over that paper."

The editor obeyed. He foresaw a truce to hostilities, and many future "pars" descriptive of this interview.

Adèle scanned the "rag," as she called it, with mirth-filled eyes.

"Now," she said sharply. "For instance, you say here that I—~~my~~ mind you—had on some good diamonds. • I had nothing of the sort."

"I'm sorry for you, madam. I know it's becoming a frequent thing in Society for ladies to—ah, make serviceable use of their jewels and replace them by Parisian imitations warranted to escape detection by the keenest-eyed husband."

"You—you really *are*——" exclaimed Adèle breathlessly.

"Calculated to surprise even a British aristocrat," he interpolated pleasantly.

"But my jewels *are* all right; only you said diamonds, and I wore *pearls*! There's mis-statement number one."

"Just a printer's error, I assure you. Im-

possible to escape *on* occasions, in the hurry of going to press. The well of Truth gets muddy, and some pearls *of* information sink to the bottom. On this occasion it *appears* to have been diamonds."

"Printers' errors must be very convenient things for editors," remarked Adèle dryly. "Not long ago a whole story appeared in one of these so-called Society ink-pots. It was declared to be the work of a well-known author! The next issue contained a statement from the author ~~that~~ he hadn't written a word of it. The editor merely apologised for using his name. *That* also, it appeared, was a printer's error!"

"Ex—actly. These things will happen even under *the* strictest editorial supervision," drawled Mr. Topham Hall.

Lady Beaudesart was 'now enjoying herself hugely. This interview would make such good copy for the Society novel she intended to write some day, when she had a little spare time—a novel for which she had collected several incidents relative to the life of ancient friends, and modern enemies.

She again scanned the obnoxious columns of *The Wasp*. "Ah!" she exclaimed. "How do you explain this?"

She read out the *canard* respecting Oscar Poseurenwitz and his residence in the Mile End Road.

"This is distinctly libellous," she added.

"May be," observed Mr. Topham Hall coolly. "But it is, you will allow, also distinctly true! Your musical *protégé*, Marchioness, hails from that *unaristocratic* quarter of the Metropolis. His family are in ver-ry reduced circumstances. His mother *presides* at present over a linen-washing business, and his respectable father plays the trombone at a theatre in that dismal part of your great city designated as 'Merry Islington'!"

"It's not true!" flashed out Adèle angrily. "I know all about him. He's an Academy pupil, and resides in the West End." (She knew that, for she paid the rent of his rooms.)

"Marchioness, I never stated that the young man resided in those humble quarters. I merely observed he hailed *from* there. I can verify *that* statement without any fear of consequences. Would you like his humble parents' address?"

"Certainly not," snapped Adèle crossly. "After all he can't help who they were. He *is* a genius, and I'm determined the world shall know him."

"You're one of the independent sort, and I guess you can do as you like. But you can't alter this young man's parentage as you've done his name, and if you conclude to make him a genius, you'll have to back your opinion to a pretty *considerable* tune. Your friend the Flying Dutchman lady is more fortunate. She *has* struck twelve with her discovery. That beautiful young

Hungarian has got a gold mine in her throat. That's patent to even a limited intelligence."

"Yours, or your informant's?" asked Adèle quickly.

"I guess you're smart enough when you like to take the trouble, Marchioness. But you're not up to my level—yet."

He leant back and surveyed her critically. He was wondering if he could buy her services as he had already bought those of illpecunious titleholders and hangers-on to the frills of Society. He allowed she looked "tip-top," but her dress and carriage and liveries bore that stamp of unostentatious good breeding which rarely appeals to the American understanding.

"She was riled at first, but she's cooled down considerable," he thought. "I guess I shan't hear any more about legal action. Wonder if there's anything I could do for her? Write up that boy, perhaps. I don't mind climbing down a rung of last week's ladder to go up *two* a month hence."

He leant forward persuasively. "Say, I'd like to do business with your ladyship, if you're agreeable. You seem hurt about your *protégé* bein' cut up in my paper. Just you let this slide and I'll give him a leg-up next time he plays in public. Not only here, but on the other side. 'Twon't be the first time by a good few that I've manufactured a genius to order. Only if I do this I'd expect

you to subscribe regularly for *The Wasp*, and leave it lying about on your parlour tables, so that other members of the British aristocracy may see it. Is it done?"

Lady Beaudesart rose with the dignity of offended integrity, and walked to the door. With her hand on the handle she turned, and—walked back.

"You'll contradict that criticism on Herr Poseurenwitz's playing?"

"Every word of it, my lady."

"You'll say it was a mistake about—the Mile End Road?"

"The most confounded error that ever crept into print."

"And you'll give his concert two columns, and advertise him in America?"

"I will. Certainly."

"Then, you can send me a dozen copies every week. They'll do for fire-lighters. Good afternoon."

* * * * *

"Snakes and alligators! I said it should hum. And it's just *going* to hum. Only three issues, and I've collared the British aristocracy! Mark Washington Topham Hall, you are a genius of the first water, as they said in Baltimore."

* * * * *

XVIII.

ADELE BEAUDESART was so excited over her encounter with a Press autocrat, that she drove to Mrs. Brady's flat in Mount Street in the hopes of finding her in, and pouring out the events of the last hour. Mrs. Brady was at home to sympathetic ears. Adèle found her in the drawing-room still wearing outdoor attire. She had been shopping.

"You!" she exclaimed. "How delightful! Oh, do send the carriage away and stay for a good long chat. I've been dying to see you."

"And I to see you. I've no end to tell you."

"May I send the carriage away?"

"Yes, if you like. I had some other calls to make, but they'll do another time."

Adèle sank into a chair and threw off her sables, while Mrs. Brady gave the order.

"And now what is the wonderful intelligence?" demanded that lady, as she returned and also seated herself. "We shall have tea in a minute. I'm so tired. I've been at Swan and Edgar's the whole afternoon. You look quite excited. Have *you* been left a fortune also, like Trottie?"

She spoke of that high priestess quite familiarly now when alone with Adèle Beaudesart.

"A fortune! Oh dear, no. I wish I had. It's something awful the way money goes, and the amount of bills one always seems to owe. How delightfully snug you are here, Perenna! And how much nicer maids are than menservants! My footmen are the most distracting creatures. The old ones generally drink, and the young ones are always falling in love with the cook, or the chambermaids, and then they do nothing, or all give notice together. They say we shall have to fall back on Chinese servants soon. The young men all want to go into business, and the girls into shops or offices. I wish the Government had let things alone and not bothered about education of the masses. It will soon be as bad here as in America, where the servants never say 'master' or 'mistress,' and only work when they please."

She paused as the neat parlourmaid entered with tea. Mrs. Brady's lovely Angora cat followed her, wearing a necklet of Parisian diamonds, to which was attached a heart-shaped locket inscribed with her name. Lady Beaudesart stroked the animal's soft fur and noted its adornments.

"Have you had her miniaturized yet? That's the latest thing. My Omar looks a dream in a gold frame set with amethysts. I chose amethysts because they suit his complexion."

Mrs. Brady laughed. "Are you going to keep it up, or shall we be *real* for a little while?" she asked.

"Perenna," said Lady Beaudesart solemnly, "I have come to the conclusion that Society is

the most idiotic institution ever set going in this idiotic world! Is it any wonder the papers insult us, the theatres make fun of us, and the lower classes despise us? We have brought it all upon ourselves, and the most hopeless thing in the whole business is that there's no way to stop it. The thing has been set going like a huge juggernaut car, and it will roll off and on, crushing out decency, morality, good taste, and common sense until nothing *can* remain but the mangled corpses of wasted lives!"

Mrs. Brady was so astonished at this outburst that she forgot to fill the teacups, but remained with the silver teapot in her hand, staring at her friend in wide-eyed astonishment.

"My dear Adèle!" she exclaimed.

"Oh! I'm perfectly serious for once," continued Lady Beaudesart. "I've had enough to make me so. I've just come from the office of a Society paper. I think the editor was an American, or a very good imitation. At all events, we had a battle over *les convenances* as understood by modern journalism."

Mrs. Brady finished pouring out the tea, and handed her friend a cup. "This sounds interesting," she said. "But don't tell me you give Society editors 'tips.'"

"I've not quite reached that depth of degradation," said Adèle. "No; I went to threaten legal penalties for impertinence, but it was a case of 'I came—I saw—I was—conquered.'"

She laughed softly, remembering the very young editor and the *braggadocio* of *The Wasp*.

"Legal penalties!" Mrs. Brady hurriedly set down her cup. "Adèle, do you mean *this*?"

She dragged a copy of the paper from underneath a cushion. Curiosity had prompted her to replace the one she had destroyed. No wonder the editor boasted that the circulation was on the increase.

"That's the creature," said Lady Beaudesart, catching sight of the now familiar insect on the title-page. "Yes, my dear, I was so enraged at what it said about my poor Oscar that I went to the office myself. I expected—well, I hardly knew what, but I only found two dingy little rooms, two beardless boys conducting the business—one was clerk and one was editor—and a pile of all the other Society things topped by a pair of scissors. Oh, it was the funniest thing!"

Again she leant back and laughed at the recollection. Mrs. Brady did not join in her mirth. "I was very nearly going there myself. Do you think it comes under the heading of libel?"

"I'm afraid *not*, although I threatened it. The editor didn't seem to mind. He was as cheeky as a schoolboy. He told me he'd studied journalism in the U—nited States. Why *do* Americans speak so oddly? At all events, after a tearing row I left promising to take in the rag every week and leave it (where do you think he wanted it left?) on my *parlour* table! Have I such a thing, my dear?"

"It is something too homely and old-fashioned

for Park Lane," laughed Mrs. Brady. "But seriously, Adèle, you don't mean you allowed this man to get the better of you?"

"Oh, no, not the *better*. He had to come down off his stilts, I can tell you." She rapidly related the chief points of the interview.

"I wish I had known you were going to do this," said Mrs. Brady gravely.

"Why?"

"Because I consider myself equally aggrieved. The remarks about me have a familiarity that savours of impertinence!"

"But, my dear, familiarity is just the art of present-day journalism. Take up any paper—sixpenny, threepenny, penny, halfpenny, it doesn't matter which—and read the Society notes. They are all done to impress the public with the idea that the individual writing them is on common or garden terms with the persons written of. The style has crept in, and creeps on. It's our own fault. We thought it smart at first, but I think we've changed our opinion now. If we're in the park we're at the mercy of the 'looker-on,' who says our toques were 'becoming,' or we were wearing 'some nice furs.' Are we at the theatre—a typewriter in the pit spots us, or bribes our names, in order to state next morning that 'the Duchess of A—— was looking very nice, in a box, with some good diamonds.' That 'Lady B—— wore her own hair dressed low on her

neck.' That 'Lord and Lady C—— were seen *together* in the stalls' (as if *that* was too uncommon an occurrence to be passed over). That among 'the smart portion of the audience was the Countess of Z—— wearing a large diamond feather and an ornament at her neck.' That 'Mrs. M——, just returned from her honeymoon tour, ~~was~~ looking really pretty in black.' Pshaw! it's sickening. I could quote on by the hundred —yet we pass the impertinence week by week because it keeps our names before the public, and impresses them with our popularity."

"But, Adèle——"

"Oh, my dear, I know; I'm one of them. My offences are as great, but that doesn't prevent ~~me~~ from loathing the whole silly business. When Maudie Vivian went out as a nurse to South Africa we all laughed. I—I envied her, but I hadn't the courage to break off some idiotic engagements, and go too! We're all fools, or cowards. I wonder another deluge doesn't come and sweep us off the face of the earth. But I believe men like Chrissy think they could face the Almighty with an epigram on their lips that would 'excuse their worst sins! No, don't stop me, Perry. I've broken ground at last, and must have my fling. The reason I liked you was because you were so different from the rest of us. Be thankful for it. Copy our fads if you like, but not ourselves. Not our worship of cads

who jingle their money-bags on the doorsteps of houses made historical by great names we have disgraced; not our insane, indecent passions, as shortlived as they are notorious; not our wasteful expenditure; our senseless amusements; our mania for dress and luxury; our terror of growing old; our fear of our own daughters' rivalry. Our clinging to social position as the one desirable thing on earth, while yet we jeopardise it for any new sin that promises sensation! Rotten! Rotten! Rotten! That's what this life is under the glitter of its surface. A mere handful of decent, well-bred, sensible folk are left surveying a quagmire that shifts and shivers and threatens all it bears with destruction. That quagmire is the thing we have made of Society by our craze for smartness!"

She flung herself back in her chair, breathless with emotion, and Mrs. Brady stared at her with wide, incredulous eyes.

"Why, Adèle, what *has* come to you?" she exclaimed.

"Oh, I don't know. I get like that sometimes. Perhaps it's hysteria. Perhaps it's a bit of my *real* self coming to the surface. My *real* self! God! how far that's drifted in twenty-seven years! I was proud once, Perenna. Proud, and clean of mind and life. Now——"

She lifted her ungloved hands and looked at their lovely whiteness, their sparkling rings.

"No. I won't quote Lady Macbeth. She's old-fashioned, like my father——" Her voice suddenly broke. "Thank God, he doesn't know what I've become. If he were here——"

A storm of sobs broke from her. She covered her face. Mrs. Brady rose and went to her side in veritable consternation. Was it possible this could be Adèle? The laughing, vivacious, heedless young beauty, whom her set adored, who had seemed the veriest *mondaine* of them all?

She strove to soothe that strange outburst, administering feminine remedies and feminine comfort alternately. And when Adèle seemed quieter, she administered her own recipe for nerves — a mixture of whisky and soda, in which the whisky took pre-eminence. Then she made her lie down on a sofa and rest, declaring she was overtired, overexcited, her nerves——

"My dear, good soul, one has no business with nerves at my age," half laughed, half cried Adèle Beaudesart. "I suppose this is the penalty of allowing oneself to be *real* once in a way. . . . Lie down? Very well, I will. Only you must sit beside me and let me talk or rest, as the mood takes me. Oh, my dear, how thankful I am I came to you, instead of going to Trottie!"

Mrs. Brady, as she arranged cushions and subdued the lights, thought in her heart she was equally thankful.

XIX

ADELE lay there, spent and exhausted; and Mrs. Brady sat by her without speaking, without moving, till the wild eyes closed and sleep came.

Fearful of disturbing her, she still sat on, without even removing her hat or coat. The great Angora sprang into her lap and purred a lullaby for itself. Her mistress's hand wandered lovingly over the soft fur, pausing suddenly as it touched the glittering collar with its pendant.

An odd little smile parted her lips. "After all there's no credit in being a copyist," she thought. "Among so many sheep following each other, surely the one who chooses its own hole in the hedge is worth more respect."

Half unconsciously her fingers pressed a spring, and the feline necklet reposed on her lap. The cat shook its ruff and purred loudly, as if glad to be eased of a burden that was still a novelty.

Her mistress leaned back, and her keen, bright eyes went to the recumbent figure on the couch.

Adèle had fallen into a deep sleep. Her cheeks were flushed from recent excitement. The swollen

lids of her closed eyes gave a pathetic softness to her face. Teardrops still glittered on the curling lashes.

"I wonder if she meant all she said," thought Mrs. Brady. "It seems so odd, so unlike her. The last thing I should have expected! Why, she's one of the very smartest and most popular women in London. I thought she only lived for Society. Well born, well bred, beautiful, popular, and to talk like that!"

The wild outburst seemed still to echo in her ears. The hysteria born of overstrained nerves, morphia, and excitement was like a sudden warning of Nature's possible revenge on the votaries of Fashion.

A little cold shiver ran through her own comfortable person. The "writing on the wall" might be for her eyes as well as for those of the gay and giddy crowd who had represented to her the most desirable things of this world.

Were they so much to be envied after all?

As she sat there in the quiet room listening to the sleeper's quiet breathing, her mind travelled to and fro over past years and present contingencies. It had been the height of her ambition to be "in the swim," if only for the "little season," as much for George's sake as for her own. To see him well established, well married, had been the dream of many years.

For once success had smiled upon her. The

odd fashion in which she had made and kept Adèle Beaudesart's friendship promised yet better things. • She could enjoy the society she had so ardently desired—dine, dance, parade in its company; have a Cairene, or country-house winter; extend a viceregal presentation to a Buckingham Palace State concert. All this with very little trouble or expense to herself, seeing that Adèle was both rich and generous.

It had looked delightfully easy, and she had been troubled by no scruples. But as she sat on in that quiet room, and watched the dusk fill its distant corners, and listened to the fall of the embers and the soft breathing of the sleeping woman by her side, she was conscious of a feeling altogether new and not altogether welcome.

That frenzied outburst of her friend proclaimed a day of reckoning. It would not always be possible to drown thought, to push every consideration of life's worth and life's meaning into a lumber-room with locked door; to throw one's cast-off hours aside as easily as one's cast-off clothes.

Even she had had uncomfortable moments; borne the burden of regrets. "Eat, drink, for to-morrow we die," was all very well as a motto; but what of the merrows where, instead of death, came memories; instead of youth old age?

The Society grandmother, who *looked* thirty and knew herself sixty, must find life's treadmill a

somewhat hard and wearisome penalty for artistic frauds. There was one stern, unalterable fate before all humanity—the fate Hamlet had preached over Yorick's skull, the fate that spoke to false beauty from its mirror, "Paint thee an inch thick, yet to this end must thou come!" And then—what good all the striving, and contriving, and contemptible rivalry that men and women called "life"?

Perenna Brady went through a very *mauvais quart d'heure* as she thus reflected. One of the very worst she had ever undergone. As a rule she took her troubles lightly, and discounted her *petits faux* as carelessly as she committed them. But something very unpleasant had caught her in its grip after that scene with Adèle Beaudesart; something she could not shake off. She grew so uncomfortable that she wished Adèle would wake and speak to her, if only to give assurance of her actual claims on the life she had derided.

But Adèle slept on soundly, deeply, dreamlessly, and the Angora followed her example.

Mrs. Brady grew restless as the room became dark and the fire died down. She did not like to ring for the parlourmaid, nor mend it herself; and her mind seemed abnormally active in this hushed gloom. Undesirable memories sprang to life and confronted her like ghostly shapes in a prolonged nightmare.

It was all Adèle's fault. What had possessed

her to have hysterics on this particular occasion? That cry, "Rotten! rotten! rotten!" rang like a clarion-call in her ears.

Could she *really* mean that this sacred Cult that called itself "Society" was worthless, vicious, contemptible?

Certainly that particular set whose dohrs had suddenly opened to herself failed to impress her with its aristocratic dignity, or intellectual *kudos*. But still she had a lingering reverence for good blood, old names, ancestral honours. It was true that nowadays the good blood allowed itself to mix with such plebeian fluid as flowed in the veins of ballet-dancers, music-hall stars, and American heiresses. True that wealth had ousted the patrician element from many a modern title. That ancient and noble heritages had fallen to the money bags of oil-kings, and coal-kings, and shoddy democrats, who yet ruled the very world that affected to despise them.

Such things were patent to anyone who took the trouble to inquire.

And the season, great or small, what was it after all? The same set revolving round the same set till it was, or ought to be, sick of it. The summer passed in a hot and dusty city, in hot and crowded rooms, ending in race-meetings and yachting contests, where many a noble fortune was hazarded and many a life ruined for ever.

The autumn, less a season than an epoch of slaughter; the slaughter of birds and beasts, whose only crime was existence. The winter, an excuse for crowding certain houses like booths in a fair, because only certain houses were entertaining enough, or exciting enough for smart people to visit. Where among all these foolish and, useless occupations was there leisure for culture, for the display of any true grace or courtesy, for sweet and homely virtues?

What Society queen was bold enough to close her doors to the clamour of ill-gotten riches, the siege of any *parvenu* or boor who could boast of millions to spend, or lend, or *buy* favours?

It was impossible to pass these things in review, and not see how terrible a future they prophesied. Even Adèle Beaudesart, votary of fashion as she was, and *au fait* with every detail, fad, and folly of the hour, had recognised their uselessness.

She turned suddenly towards the couch. Adèle stirred, opened her eyes, sat up. A vague bewilderment was on her face.

• "Gracious, where am I? Have I been asleep?"

"You are with me, dear," said Mrs. Brady gently, as she put down the cat and moved towards the couch. "You were very tired, and I persuaded you to have a rest."

Adèle sank back again amongst the cushions. "I do feel tired," she said drowsily. "I—oh,

"I remember now. That paper; the editor—my storming here. I suppose I was very foolish, Perenna? But I'm glad I had the sense to come to you."

"So am I," said Mrs. Brady heartily. "I hope you feel better? May I ring to have the tea things removed? I was afraid of disturbing you."

"You dear soul! And you've been sitting there like Patience all this time! Of course, ring. Oh dear, how tired I am! I wish I hadn't to go home."

"Don't!" exclaimed Mrs. Brady. "Stay here with me, and have dinner. We two—alone. Perhaps it will be a novelty for you, but a quiet evening once in a way is no bad tonic for overstrung nerves."

"Like the 'rest' day that the complexion people order once a month. Trottie observes hers religiously. I think she wears a face-mask, too. But only her maid is allowed to see her. Perry, tell me, did I talk a great deal of nonsense before I fell asleep?"

"A great deal of truth, in my opinion," said Mrs. Brady. "I wonder if you meant it?"

"If it was truth, you may be sure I didn't. I thought I'd forgotten how to speak it. Why—what have you done with Tratty's collar?"

Mrs. Brady stooped and picked up the glittering bauble from the carpet where it lay.

"I think it spoils her appearance," she said.

"I do not intend her to wear it again. Besides, if one really thinks of it, it's very foolish to deck animals with jewellery."

Adèle was silent for a moment. "You're the most sensible woman I've ever met," she said at last. "Perenna, tell me, why did you want to be one of us? I'm sure you're a million times too good. I recognised that from the first."

"I'm not good at all, my dear Adèle; but I've tried to keep a few grains of common sense with which to leaven the feather-brained irresponsibility of my race! I plunged into your world rather recklessly, I must confess. Perhaps, too, my credentials were scarcely up to the mark——"

"Up to the mark!" scoffed Adèle Beaudesart. "*Our* mark! You have all we lack, I think—good breeding, wit, refinement, common sense."

"And—poverty," laughed Mrs. Brady. "That's a sin for which there is no forgiveness."

Adèle's delicate brows drew themselves together.

"I would gladly barter my wealth to have your poverty and your clean mind," she said. "But really, Perenna, you're not poor. You are quite equal to holding your own in the swim. With all the value Society sets on money, it occasionally recognises the worth of some well-born, well-bred, unnotorious claimant. You're all right, my dear. Only——"

"Only what?"

"I still cannot understand why you wanted to get into our set."

Mrs. Brady laughed softly, and drew nearer the recumbent figure. The fire had been remade, the tea equipage removed. The pretty room looked home-like and peaceful in the softened lustre of shaded lights.

It was an hour for confidences. The question was, how much was it wise to confide?

"If I told you the truth, Adèle," she said, "I am quite sure you would not believe me. I am doubtful whether to risk my hold upon your affection."

"You may run the risk without fear."

Mrs. Brady turned to her impulsively. "I had had several big seasons; I thought I would try the 'little one' for a change."

"Yes, I do that—occasionally."

"It was not entirely on my own account. There was George."

Adèle Beaudesart's eyes grew soft.

"George is worthy of your consideration," she said.

"I think he is. He is dear to me as any son. Well, you know how oddly you and I met, and then how one thing led to another, until to-day. That really is all. There's nothing very remarkable about it, is there?"

"No, except its extreme simplicity. You could

give the cleverest schemer points, my dear, and yet rope in first."

Mrs. Brady felt somewhat uncomfortable. Had she given herself away? Was it quite—wise?

Adèle turned suddenly round and held out her hand. "I seem recovering, don't I? The old Adam is hard to kill. You dear honest soul, for Heaven's sake let me go on believing in you, or I shall commit suicide!"

They talked on long and earnestly after that. Adèle Beaudesart threw aside all her affectations and satirised her set with unsparing candour. She was even reckless enough to translate some hidden meanings in the *Vie Intime*, which made the colour pale a little in Mrs. Brady's healthy cheek, and caused her to draw a sharp breath of—incredulity.

For the first time she was thankful for forty years of clean living, whose sins had at least been open to the eyes of day.

"Now do you wonder that I ask why you want to be considered one of 'us'? Inhale the moral miasma of our lives? I could tell you names,—but no matter. I think I've enlightened you enough."

"But you?, Why do you allow your name to be associated with these others?"

"I think the man whom I had the—dishonour to call husband, cast enough soot on my name to defy further blackening! Besides, I don't care."

I've no one to worry over what I do! And they really amuse me. I never can understand whether they take each other in earnest, or are only 'fooling around,' as our polished American cousins say. I think they're afraid of each other, but not perfectly regardless of outside criticism. They seem proud of their advertised iniquities, perhaps because they cloak—other things. You'll find now that Trottie will carry the whole train of her London cranks to her old-world country house; that the *chef* will do his best to atone for Prince's, and the Carlton; that bridge and baccarat and ping-pong will fill our evenings; that her *masseuse*, and her manicurist, and her portable Turkish baths will follow her exit with the religion of devotees! Eldorado will have his own special maid told off to travel with him, and will wear the latest thing in fashionable canine overcoats, besides having his country outfit and his embroidered handkerchiefs. He will even leave his visiting card on his high-bred canine acquaintances with 'P.P.C.' duly inscribed thereon. Per!"—she raised herself suddenly on one elbow—“thank goodness you've taken that idiotic collar off your cat's neck. When I saw *that*, I began to lose hopes of you.”

Mrs. Brady coloured. “Everyone did it, and I thought I'd follow suit.”

“Haven't you—even *you* the courage of your opinions?”

"Such courage would spell unpopularity for anyone not born in the purple."

"Nonsense! It's that courage we want—the, courage to show us what we *are*, to make us ashamed of ourselves and our useless, selfish, luxurious lives. Perenna, you might be the one to do it if you only chose!"

A sudden choking sensation came into Mrs. Brady's throat. If she chose? Was it not rather if she—dared? And how could she dare? It would mean social ostracism, the demolishing of her castle of ambition, perhaps even the spoiling of George's prospects; it would mean returning to Ireland and trying to live on an income she had never found sufficient, and social exile for the future.

Well enough she knew that the one thing the world hates, is truth—the truth of anything it does, the unveiling of any one of its multitude of hypocrisies, the stripping of any mask from its, hydra-headed deity of Fashion!

"Why, it would need the temerity of—a John Knox!" she gasped suddenly.

"Or an Irishwoman," said Adèle Beaudesart.

XX

THE arrangements for that Christmas week kept Mrs. Vanderdecken employed to an extent she had not bargained for.

At last the worries of "arrangement" by correspondence" reached a climax, and she went down herself with a staff of servants and workpeople, in order to see that her orders were carried out. At the last moment she left Zara in charge of Adèle Beaudesart, and arranged the train by which her visitors were to come down. Two carriages were reserved, owing to the crush and bustle of the Christmas season, and strict orders were left for the whole party to be at Paddington Station on the twenty-fourth, in time for the Cornish express.

Mrs. Brady was taking Eugénie, and Adèle her French maid. Mrs. Gideon Lee had no toilet assistant. Trottie was always good-natured in such matters and willing to lend one of her own bodyguards to a special friend. The party, in order to be strictly *intime*, contained an equal division of the sexes.

Mrs. Brady ran them over quickly.

Adèle, George; Zara, Lord Chris; herself,

Basil Warrender ; Mrs. Gideon, Lee, Tony Chevenix—eight in all.

She found herself wondering why Trottie had secured no *cavalier à service* for herself. It seemed very magnanimous, or had she catalogued the list wrongfully? In any case, she was sure of her own choice. Basil Warrender was the only man she had wasted a thought upon, since her first introduction to this select coterie. Whimsical he was, but never ridiculous; never a *poseur* like Tony Chevenix, or an affectation of culture like Lord Chris.

She was not sorry for an opportunity of meeting him on more intimate and unconventional terms; of studying him, so to say, at close quarters. She had seen very little of him since that supper-party at Trottie Vanderdecken's, though George had spoken of occasional dinners.

It was with no inconsiderable amount of excitement that Mrs. Brady found herself at the station on the appointed morning. The crowd and confusion made her thankful for a spare ten minutes, and the knowledge that Trottie had secured carriages for the party.

She left Eugénie to look after the luggage, and hastened to the platform, where a civil functionary piloted her to the compartment reserved. Just as she seated herself, Basil Warrender arrived.

His greeting was as cordial as she could have desired. He busied himself with preparations for

her comfort, bought her a heap of magazines and papers, saw to the foot-warmers, and finally seated himself opposite.

"Only five minutes! I do hope they won't miss the train!" exclaimed Mrs. Brady. "Ah, here comes Adèle. But where's Zara?"

"Following—with George," remarked Basil Warrender. "How lovely she looks in those white furs!"

Mrs. Brady's glance held some slight uneasiness as she leant forward, and made signs to the hurrying figures.

They all arrived, one on the heels of the other now, Lord Chris being the last.

As the door closed Adèle Beaudesart gave a faint cry.

"Oscar!" she said. "Has anyone seen Oscar? Trottie wired me last night to bring him to play accompaniments, and I sent a wire at once, told him the train. Oh! I do hope he won't miss it!"

"Well, there's no room for him here," drawled Lord Chris, settling himself comfortably in his fur-lined overcoat. "He'll have to travel by himself. By Jove! there's a guard rushing him into the next carriage. He's about ten seconds to spare."

"The next compartment!" exclaimed Mrs. Brady. "But that's where the maids are!"

"Perhaps the guard mistook him for a *laquais*

de place," muttered George, who had taken a strong dislike to the false Poseurenwitz at the concert.

He had placed Zara in the end corner seat, and taken the one opposite to her. She looked up at his exclamation. "Ah, the poor boy!" she said. "What a pity that he cannot come in here with us!"

"Shall I offer him my seat at the next stopping-place?" suggested George icily.

"Ah, no! You mean kindly, but why should you displace yourself?"

"To please you," murmured the young man tenderly. "I would do a great deal more than 'displace' myself, though under present circumstances I should consider it the height of self-sacrifice. Ah! there's the signal! Heavens, what a crowd! Why, half the people must have been seeing the other half off."

The occupants of the carriage settled down. Mrs. Brady, remembering certain hints of Eugénie's, felt some compassion for the poor young artist if Fate had thrown him into her company. Certainly Lord Chrissy's valet was there also in charge of twenty-four pairs of boots, whose polish his master had never entrusted to alien hands, and for whose accommodation he generally required a special room. Trottie had reassured him on the latter point before he left town. The valet, however, was a gentleman of

such very superior breeding that it was possible Oscar might not feel quite at home in his company. But there was no help for it now. They were off, and the first stopping-place would be Bath.

Lord Chris commenced a dissertation on foot-warmers. How behind the times and pig-headed were English railway companies! Why couldn't they take a lesson from America? That was the only country where a railway journey could be made with some degree of comfort.

"And no risk," agreed Basil Warrander, "except occasional wholesale slaughter represented by their notion of express speed."

"Our risk is as great, and the comfort *nil*," said Lord Chris sulkily.

He removed his beautifully polished boots from the hideous pewter sausage that had so offended his artistic tastes.

"It's either too hot to bear, or too cold to be of any use," he declared. "And warranted to give the tortured traveller chilblains sooner than most of the ingenious inventions of ignorance."

"Can ignorance invent?" asked Mrs. Brady, who was somewhat annoyed at change of *vis-à-vis*. "I thought some small amount of knowledge was necessary."

"On the contrary," said Lord Chris, with one of his odd looks at her. "Invention is a mere inspiration that may attack the innocent as well as

the guilty. A thing born of accident, like Newton's apple, and Stephenson's steam kettle, and—ping-pong."

"I do hope you're going to tell us some of your exquisite stories, Lord Chris," interposed Mrs. Gideon Lee. "This will be such a long journey. It would be terrible if we arrived bored with one another. Poor Trottie seems to expect so much of this week."

"It's a fatal mistake to expect much of anything. Disappointment is as certain as the noon-day. Besides, we never get much further than intentions."

Mrs. Brady threw a backward glance over the events that had signalled her acquaintance with these people, and recognised with an uncomfortable wonder that the assertion was quite correct.

Zara's concert had been intended to be private. It had not escaped publicity, or the Press. The coster entertainment had collapsed, though it had been organised and talked about so long. Her own dinner-party had never got further than intention. Half a dozen projected and partially-arranged schemes were equally remarkable for failure. The winter at Cairo among others. It seemed a season of Beginnings that had escaped an End. Would this week, of which so much was expected, only prove itself another unfinished episode?

The voices were still chattering around her.

She heard Lord Chris asking if anyone knew anything about Cornwall.

"Oh, noted for tin mines and things! It's where the Land's End comes from," said Mrs. Gideon Lee. "I looked it up in *Chambers's Encyclopædia*."

"Land's End! Surely we're not going *there*?" cried Adèle Beaudesart. "Where are the tickets?"

She fumbled at the clasp of her châtelaine bag, which refused to open.

"Don't be alarmed," said Mrs. Brady. "Our destination isn't quite so far. Somewhere near Penzance. Trottie said we could see St. Michael's Mount, Lord St. Levan's place, from the upper windows of the Hall."

"St. Michael's Mount is a replica of Mont St. Michel, that wonderful rock fortress on the Bretagne coast," observed Basil Warrender. "I went all over it once when I was on a sketching tour. It's odd that we know less about places in our own country, than we do of those thousands of miles away."

"Our own we have always with us," drawled Lord Chris, who was feeling somewhat unamiable and distinctly bored.

He wished he could have got into a smoking carriage. What could one do for seven mortal hours boxed up with a pack of women? He wondered vaguely why he had accepted Trottie's invitation. It was true that Christmas in London

was altogether detestable. That people would persist in trying to keep up old and barbarous customs; that piles of bills came in, and one's tailor and one's bootmaker, and one's hosier and glover and shirtmaker, and florist and tobacco-nist, and all the rest of the hateful crew who supplied one with the necessities of life, had a vile habit of sending in papers headed "Account rendered." That was one of the reasons he always tried to get away from town at this season. But then, he had always gone to Paris, or Cairo, or Monte Carlo, or New York, so as to banish such unpleasantness. To be travelling in one's own country at Christmastide, still worse to be *staying* in it, was really a very *bourgeois* proceeding.

Suddenly his gaze fell on Zara's exquisite face, framed in white fox furs, and capped by turquoise velvet. How lovely she was! But why did Trottie let her travel in such a striking costume? He half closed his eyes. It hurt his artistic sense of fitness. Adèle was all right, and Mrs. Brady——

He opened his languid eyes suddenly, and found that lady scrutinising him with steady attention.

That suddenness on his part caught and kept her gaze, and affected him with a sense of embarrassment. He had never seen any woman look at him like that; so searchingly, with such barely veiled contempt.

It made him uncomfortable. He roused himself from his languid attitude. Who and what was this woman whom Adèle Beaudesart had chosen to honour? Why had she been accepted, and why was she now to make one of the very narrow and intimate circle who were bound for these Cornish wilds?

"She's Adèle's choice, I suppose," he reflected; "seems harmless; but I wonder why she's taking me seriously? It inspires me with a desire to be more than usually shocking. I heard she was responsible for George's bringing up. Perhaps that accounts for the one fatal flaw in his character I have vainly endeavoured to amend."

He roused himself suddenly.

"My dear people," he said, "the desire has seized me to smoke. If anyone objects, he or she has only to say so, and I will banish myself to the licensed boredom of a smoking carriage."

Adèle laughed. "I think we are all too much inclined to the same vice to object. In fact, to join you is a greater temptation—than to banish."

The production of cigarette-cases and match-boxes made a pleasant stir. Mrs. Brady did not smoke. Zara did. George seemed to consider the fact only added another charm to her many perfections.

Tongues unloosed now, and congenial *vis-à-vis* were quite able to maintain a duet of mutual significance when they desired it.

Lord Chris entered on a passage of arms with Mrs. Brady. To be disagreed with was such a novel sensation that he could not forego its results.

"A woman who does not smoke ought to illustrate a novelist's idea of a matchless heroine," he observed. "Tony, if you would only look for local colour when it is at your hand, instead of travelling miles to reach it, I should restrict your fancies to present company."

"I'm afraid nothing about me would serve for a heroine that would suit Mr. Chevenix," answered Mrs. Brady.

"I'm in luck's way with my new one," broke in Tony Chevenix, with the badly concealed eagerness of a very young author. "I've had an offer to serialise it in a leading fashionable magazine. A big offer," he added, complacently.

(It was fifty pounds, and the offer came from the office of *The Wasp*.)

"Of course, you've accepted it?" said Mrs. Brady.

"*Festina lente*," murmured Lord Chris. "Tony has the beautiful rashness of youth where publishers are concerned."

"I have analysed the type of modern novel that is called successful," continued Tony Chevenix rapidly, for it was not an easy matter to maintain a conversation in which Lord Chris was concerned. He usually distanced or silenced the would-be

participators. "By successful I mean the one that sells, not the one that possesses literary merit. The two are widely apart. I find that the later years of the Victorian Era have been remarkable for two types of popularity. The Irreligious novel, and the Military novel. Both are the outcome of feminine talent. Genius is not a foregone conclusion to be attached to a sale of fifty thousand copies of—anything. The irreligious novel, of course, appeals to our smug, narrow-minded, back-parlour British householder, and his name is legion. He would consider it a crime to read, or allow his wife or daughters to read a secular *novel*. But a religious novel, with a few indecent chapters pointing to *moral* sins (especially to aristocratic moral sins), that is as the nectar of hops to his saintly palate—the sharpness of pickles to his Sunday joint."

"Not bad, Tony," murmured Lord Clriss between floating wreaths of Turkish. "Now let us hear your opinion of the military novel."

"The military novel," continued Tony, "is, of course, the one style of novel no military man would demean himself by reading. It—also is usually the work of a woman, its sign manual being the glorification of a uniformed Hercules with the face of a god, the limbs of a blacksmith, and the virtues of—his profession. It is scarcely necessary to say that this form of literature is eagerly devoured by nursemaids, governesses,

shopgirls, and innocent *débutantes*, to whom a Life Guardsman is the incarnation of all manly vices."

Lord Chris nodded. "I suppose you're right; I never read a military novel in my life. A little amusement is only what we have a right to expect from our plethora of scribblers. Modern English literature fails to supply a grain of humour."

Tony Chevenix waited impatiently for fear the ground should be cut from under his feet. He rushed once more to the fray in the interval of a cigarette puff.

"Two types of novels I have spoken of—the two that spell that vulgar thing called commercial success. The success that enables publishers to live in mansions at Hampstead, and supplies their wives with carriages, and Bond Street gowns. But I am going to strike out a new line altogether. We have had enough of types, of styles, of copyists; I am going to be daringly original."

"Every writer and every artist has said that since the world began," observed Mrs. Brady.

"Even I," said Basil Warrender, smiling.

"No one can be original, since Solomon is dead," said Lord Chris. "There's nothing we do or say, invent or execute that he has not said or done before us."

"Solomon," observed Tony vaguely. "Solomon who?"

"It's evident you never went to a Sunday-

school, dear boy," laughed Lord Chris. "I don't mean Solomon of the City, Solomon the Shark, Solomon the lover of 'little bills' and post obits, and elder sons who are coming to years of indiscretion. I mean Solomon the Wise, who ordered the decision of a maternal dispute by a sharp sword, and thus commended himself for ever to the eyes of injustice."

"Lord Chris," interposed Mrs. Brady, with sudden sharpness, "do you really think it's very funny, or very clever, to say things like that? I know you uphold that nothing in the world is worth reverence or serious consideration, but surely you might draw the line at ridiculing one book, of all the many left to your mockery."

Lord Chris stared, then took the cigarette from his lips and bowed ironically.

"My dear lady, a thousand pardons! One is apt to forget old-fashioned prejudices nowadays."

"One is apt apparently to forget a great deal that goes with 'old-fashioned prejudices,'" announced Mrs. Brady.

"I am pleased to have you to remind me," he said insolently. "We are all like sheep that have gone astray—on certain topics. It will be delightful to be shepherded into the fold."

"Perenna is quite right, Chrissy," said Lady Beaudesart sharply. "Our errors of taste are sufficiently notorious without adding irreligious scoffing to the list."

"Dear Adèle, I never add anything to my list—consciously. As for scoffing—am I not a devout attendant at St. George's, Curzon Street, since they allow one to come to evening service in evening dress—so nice and so appropriate? I regret if I have offended your friend's religious sentiments. There is nothing I respect more—in women, and believe less—in men. Let us change the subject and be secular once more. I am dying to know how Tony professes to treat any novel originally." •

"It's not a question of treating it originally. I said an original idea for a novel," corrected Tony. "We have had, as I mentioned, the Irreligious and the Military by way of explaining 'popular' success. The other sorts, the cultured, the sexual, and the analytical, have not (so I am informed) been remarkable for assisting publishers in the matter of locality, or billiard-rooms. Yet there is still a want. I see it as I scan the book lists in the *Daily Telegraph*, or gaze at the violent-hued bindings in the Strand. I am going to supply that want. A new and original hero has been evolved for my book. He is not handsome; he is not a heretical cleric, nor a man with a past, nor a scarlet-clad Life Guardsman. The frock-coat of the commercial king does not announce him in my pages. He is not the ruined hope of an aristocratic house, nor——"

"My dear Tony," broke in Lord Chris, "per-

‘haps if you could tell us what the creature is instead of what he is *not*, you might save half your lung power for future dissertations.”

“He is, then, neither more nor less than a Deformity!” announced Tony solemnly. “A hideous, misshapen, wonderful being from whom women shrink in horror, yet adore with the exquisitely brutal self-sacrifice of sexual curiosity. He is a creation at once abnormal and refined. His mind revels in intellectual orgies, and his body in physical degradation. I have painted him limb by limb. I know his dwarfed stature as well as I know my own inches. The colour of his hair, the very texture of his skin are as dear and familiar things. ‘With his existence dawns a new era of liberated genius. Untrammelled, unabashed, unskinking, we show our canvas to our fellow-mortals, and they shall fall down and worship. Women will follow in our steps (if they have not already done so). The Greek god Beauty has had its day; my work will inaugurate a new and terrible and tragic force. The novel of the next epoch will be the novel of Deformity; and I, Tony Chevenix, shall be its inventor.”

XXI

THE advent of luncheon baskets, and the endeavour to eat and drink while the furious rocking of the train rendered each process a thing of difficulty, enlivened another hour for the travellers.

Oscar Jones was rescued from the company of maids and valets, and fed and comforted by his protectress. Tony and Lord Chris exchanged temporarily into a smoking carriage so that the ruffled feathers of genius might be smoothed into shape once again. Adèle and Mrs. Brady talked confidences in low voices. Wearied by the noise and rattle of the train, and wishing the long journey over, Zara slept the whole afternoon, and George and Basil Warrender read their papers.

As the December day drew in, they examined the country with anxious glances. It looked bleak and very desolate. When the train at last ran along by the water-side, and the towering rock of St. Michael's Mount rose precipitately from the sea, a murmur of thankfulness escaped.

"At last!" breathed through the carriage, and an upheaval of rugs and wraps and light literature spoke of general relief.

Two tall footmen came to the door, and conducted the party to various landaus and broughams awaiting them.

It was too dark to see what the country was like, even had they felt strongly interested in it. At present they were possessed by one ardent desire to be housed, and warmed, and fed.

Adèle Beaudesart was the most curious of the quartette in the first landau. She peered into the darkness; she tried to follow the windings of the road; she exclaimed in wonder at the pure, soft air, and the clearness of the sky, and the luminance of the atmosphere.

It was nearly an hour's drive to Weard Hall. Lights flashed through the darkness of a short avenue, and then a sharp turn showed a low, wide building with many windows, and a deep arched porch. The entrance door was flung open at the sound of carriage-wheels, and the tired and curious travellers flocked into a large square hall, where logs blazed in an open fireplace, and candles gleamed from brass sconces on the old-oak walls, and lit the table by the fireplace, where an antique silver tea-service sent Lord Chris into artistic raptures.

Mrs. Vanderdecken, in a quaint velvet gown with a thick cord girdle, welcomed them cordially. She held Eldorado in a leash composed of netted silk, with some vague idea that châtelaines of ancient manors always had a hound by their side

when they wished to be impressive. She was delighted that her term of penal solitude was over, and that she had an opportunity of entertaining an appreciative audience once again, besides the delight of displaying her new possessions to her dearest friends.

They all crowded round the fireplace, chattering, exclaiming, appraising, and inquisitive as a flock of rooks. It was all so quaint, so delightful, so old-fashioned, so defiant of Waring's copies, and Gillow's mediæval inspirations.

"Yes, it is old-fashioned, I grant," allowed Trottie, as she began to pour out tea. "I only hope you won't yearn for Park Lane as I do for Pont Street. The bathrooms are impossible! There's no gas or electric light. Poor Chicot is in despair over kitchen deficiencies, and the maids have to sleep in what they call barracks. I don't know whether to spend a fortune on improvements, or leave it as it is."

"I should leave it," said Lord Chris, glancing at the family portraits, the wonderful old china, and the quaint-shaped bookcases set about and interspersed with such modern touches as Eastern rugs and tapestried screens, and great oriental bowls of holly and myrtle and escallonia. There were plenty of Trottie's favourite cushioned divans, and deep, low chairs set in all sorts of nooks and dusky recesses. The shallow and beautiful oak staircase sloped upwards to an open gallery

tapestried with quaint mediæval figures, and relieved by occasional pictures, or old armour.

"It's positively enchanting," declared Mrs. Gideon Lee. "Quite takes one back to the Middle Ages. Trottie, you ought to have the design copied for the stage."

The others were busy with that mixture of sweets and liqueurs, tea, and hot cakes and caviare sandwiches, that means the modern Five-o'clock. For a moment conversation lapsed before the calls of hunger.

"Have you discovered the haunted room yet?" asked Basil Warrender.

"I've been too busy to think of it. I go to bed at *ten* o'clock, and actually sleep till morning. What do you think of that?"

They looked at her as if asked to believe in an ancient miracle.

"That it accounts for your looking so unusually unhealthy. Is it the air?" asked Lord Chris.

"Perhaps. It's so mild. The mornings are wonderful—warm as June. One can sit by the sea and literally bathe in sunshine."

"I foresee a new phase of aquatic sports," observed Lord Chris. "I hope the natives are not shockable. I am sure you will do us all a great deal of good, Trottie, as we shall do you. And everyone believes we are in Egypt."

This sounded ambiguous in connection with its preceding sentiment, but Mrs. Vanderdecken

smiled her vague smile, and the circle was momentarily embraced by understanding glances.

Zara had thrown aside her white furs, and was crouching before the fire with outstretched hands. Mrs. Vanderdecken bent over her caressingly and whispered inquiries in soft, sibilant German.

Mrs. Brady, sitting a little apart, tried to keep inexpressible repugnance from any outward sign. Basil Warrender brought her fresh tea, and then seated himself by her side.

"I want to hear a few words of sense," he said. "Chris and Tony are apt to get on one's nerves during a railway journey. But when Trotter follows suit——! Tell me, do you think I have made an odd choice of friends?"

"I do," she said readily. "At first it seemed only amusing, the way they talked. But a perpetual jeer wearies one. And that inflated language is merely a trick. Anyone can catch it up who tries."

"Yes," he agreed. "The difficulty is *not* to try. Even Lady Beaudesart's musical genius has caught the inflection. He seems to wait on Chrissy's every word as if he feared to lose a pearl of price."

"Don't you think," said Mrs. Brady, "that we all seem terribly out of place in this beautiful old-world house?"

He gave her a quick glance. "That is the crime of modernity. In places and scenes that

bear the surroundings of centuries, it is as out of place as a bit of common glass in a jewelled setting. Do look at that idiotic dog ! ”

Mrs. Brady's eyes fell on Eldorado, who was sitting up in his little tea-jacket, and wagging one paw as an intimation that he would prefer cream to conversation. Being a small animal there seemed a good deal more of tea-jacket, jewelled necklet, and bangles than dog. But his mistress always defined him as “precious,” and probably was consistent for once.

“I feel too sorry to laugh,” said Mrs. Brady. “It is bad enough for human beings to play at being contemptible. At least they might spare the dumb creatures whom they desecrate by the name of ‘pets.’”

“You have the courage of your opinions,” said Basil Warrender.

“I hope so. I come of a nation who are apt to be outspoken when their feelings are aroused.”

He lowered his voice while apparently examining the crest and shape of an antique teaspoon. “Thinking as you do, feeling as you *must*, I am always wondering that I find you among these people.”

“Perhaps I wonder equally to find *you* !” she answered.

“I told you they meant my bread and cheese. It sounds humiliating, but one must live.”

“Yes,” she echoed, “one must live. I wonder

sometimes why we set so false a value on the conditions of our lives."

He took her empty cup, and set it down on a quaint oak stool beside him. Then he looked at the noisy, chattering group by the fire.

"It's human nature, I suppose," he answered. "The best we can get for the least we can give. A natural taste for comfort leads, by easy stages, to the appreciation of luxury."

"And its—consequences?"

"Permit me to observe that a change seems to have come over the 'spirit of your dream' also since last we spoke on these matters."

"I have heard—I have learnt." She tried to repress any sign of strong or personal feeling, and laughed lightly, if not quite naturally. "It suddenly seemed rather foolish, but having put my hand to the plough, I am curious to follow the track of its furrow."

"Only curious? Well, that is feminine and forgivable. It gives you a right to condemn baser motives. Would you have liked me better had I been content with two hundred a year and a garret, than grasped a chance of making a name that paid?"

Mrs. Brady was conscious of a slight and becoming blush at that pertinent inquiry. She felt inclined to say that she would have liked him anyway, without reference to his position, his profession, or his earnings. But the very sense of

deep feeling about any man cautioned prudence. She turned the subject with a light laugh. •

“You remind me of something I read the other day about a literary celebrity. - Someone told him that he had attained prosperity, but nothing he had produced would live. ‘Well,’ he answered, ‘when it came to a question of which should live, *myself* or my writings, I didn’t hesitate as to which I should sacrifice.’”

Basil laughed. “That sounds real enough to be a *canard*,” he said. “All the same, it has a universal application where art is concerned. We want Fame, but we also want the comforts and luxuries of other people while we are working for it, and the two don’t hang together very often. Ah, they are all moving. I suppose we have to find our rooms now.”

Trottie Vanderdecken, still with that idea of the mediæval châtelaine, was moving towards the staircase, holding Eldorado in leash.

“I am going to conduct you individually to your respective chambers,” she said. “I warn you, you’ll find nothing that you’ve been accustomed to, and everything that you haven’t. But it will be a new experience—the essence of ancient discomfort as a flavour to modern requirements. You all ought to wear martyrs’ crowns—or is it haloes?—while you’re here. I’m sure it’s perfectly divine of you to have come.”

She undulated along the tapestried gallery, a

quaint silver candlestick in one hand, and Eldorado's silken leash in the other. She had not enjoyed herself so much for a long time.

The party trailed after her in twos and threes. The rôle of mediæval hostess amused them immensely. Trottie's ways, of surprising people seemed endless.

She paused to point out one or two remarkable pieces of tapestry, and then threw open the first door after leaving the gallery.

"This," she said, "I chose for myself."

They crowded in to look and exclaim. A wider contrast to her Pont Street *bonbonnière* could not have presented itself. The huge four-poster draped in mulberry-coloured damask, the great mahogany wardrobe, the dressing-table with its carved claws and litter of silver and crystal; the tall windows draped in the same damask as the bed, just parted in the centre to allow of the modern touch of soft lace hangings.

A blazing wood fire lit up the great room with mellow radiance, and reflected itself in polished chairs and mirrors; in many quaint and strange articles, as well as displaying that medley of screens, rugs, and low, deep chairs, without which Trottie declared life to be insupportable.

"Why, it's too perfectly lovely!" exclaimed Adèle Beaudesart.

"Heavenly!" murmured Mrs. Gideon Lee. "To think how one schemes to get even *one* of these

things from the furniture shops, and here you've dropped into a house full of them. What luck!"

The nine echoed that sentiment quite as heartily. Something in the noble proportions of the apartment, in its solid, solemn beauty, set all ideas of modern so-called "art" jangling, like false coins in a child's hands.

"There are plenty rooms like it," continued Mrs. Vanderdecken. "They say there's not a chair that isn't two hundred years old. And aren't the open fireplaces delicious? One scarcely misses electric light, the fires throw out such a glow."

"What a mantelshelf!" exclaimed Lord Chris, examining the quaint carvings.

"The guest-chamber in the baronial hall," murmured Mrs. Gideon Lee, her mind still running on scenic effects. "Where does that door lead to?"

"I mean that room for Zara," said Trottie casually. "Now come and see the others."

"Why mustn't we see Zara's?" asked Adèle.

"Oh, it's only a sort of dressing-room—nothing particular. It's your turn next, Adèle—opposite side."

She threw open another door. The room disclosed was also large, and hung in faded blue damask. The entire furniture was Chippendale, and lovely china adorned walls, cupboards, and chimney-piece.

"There is no dressing-room," apologised Mrs. Vanderdecken. "They seemed to think the size

of one's bedroom compensated for all else in the olden days. But that big screen hides your bath, and that Chesterfield beside the fire is very comfy. And as for the wardrobes and presses, they'd hold enough to please Queen Elizabeth herself. Mrs. Brady, your room adjoins Adèle's. It has a dressing-room like my own."

She led the way again. The same-sized room, the same quaint and lovely carving and upholstery. The colour conveyed a sense of dull crimsons, made rich and brilliant by the deep fire-glow. Mrs. Brady expressed warm appreciation. Eugénie was already there, unpacking her mistress's trunk. The men passed on after a brief glance.

Mrs. Gideon Lee had been apportioned a smaller room, lower down the corridor. Here the decorative scheme bore the lighter touch of old-fashioned chintzes. The bed had been divested of hangings. Trottie explained that they had proved too old and moth-eaten for use, and those ordered to replace them would not be ready for some time.

There was a delightful old-world touch about the huge frilled ottomans, the deep chairs glowing with crimson roses on a pale green ground. The brass fender, the heart-shaped mirrors. Modern comfort had supplied white bear-skin rugs, a satin eider-down coverlet, portières, bowls of flowers, feminine knick-knacks, and the loan of a French maid.

Mrs. Gideon Lee purred approval, and then asked if the procession was to follow to the bachelor quarters.

"Certainly!" exclaimed Trottie. "Isn't '*honi soit*' one of our emblems? If I had had time, I should have had it worked on the portières. However, it has been *appliqued* instead."

Lord Chris made a cruel pun, and with discreet laughter they passed on down the corridor. Zara, however, remained behind in Mrs. Vanderdecken's room, and Mrs. Brady lingered to give some directions to Eugénie.

The bachelor quarters were in a wing of the building that had been a more modern addition.

"You're all together here," explained Mrs. Vanderdecken in her lucid manner. "And there's a staircase behind those baize doors by which you can come up from the small hall. I've turned *that* into a billiard-room. Don't say that I'm not considerate. There is a bathroom over there, but no water laid on, so I fail to see its use unless you can persuade your men to fill it from these china barrels on the landing. It was the only thing I could think of," she added pathetically.

Then she opened door after door, naming each guest's room as she did so.

They were a modern advance on those apportioned to the ladies, and were provided with boot-racks, and smoking tables, and shaving glasses, and other manly conveniences.

"By Jove, Trottie, you've done us very well," said Lord Chris approvingly, glancing from the low Arabian bedstead to the rosewood writing-table. "There's no need of apology for anything—as yet."

"Oh, you'll be grumbling dreadfully before the week's over," answered his hostess. "We can only light the corridors with oil lamps—I'm so afraid of exposed lights." Probably if you stay up too late you'll find this part of the house in total darkness. I warn you in time. Now I think I'll leave you to yourselves. We dine at half-past eight. Be Bohemian if you prefer. I only wear tea-gowns here. Seems more suitable somehow, and there are so many draughts. Some of the rooms have no bells, or else they don't ring, so you must help each other in finding your valets. Ask for anything you want, and don't be unhappy till you get it."

XXII

MRS. VANDERDECKEN disappeared into her own room, and Adèle entered Mrs. Brady's to explain about tea-gowns, as Trottie had suggested.

Eugénie had almost finished unpacking, and Adèle seated herself by the fire watching how deftly the Irish maid folded, unfolded, and arranged the contents of the big dress-box.

"What do you think of the place?" she asked her friend.

"'Pearls before swine' came into my head—somehow," answered Mrs. Brady, holding out her arms for the warm, wadded satin gown that Eugénie brought her.

With a little shiver of satisfaction she too subsided into a chair.

"It's all so ancient, so simple, so *reverent*. One thinks of black satin gowns and white hair, and stately dames passing up that staircase and sleeping in these wonderful beds—and rose-leaves and lavender and stillrooms, and everything that we've discarded—everything at which we mock."

"It is certainly very different from Pont Street

and Park Lane," agreed Adèle Beaudesart. "I told you what Trottie would do. Wasn't I right? She'll have ping-pong in the hall, and a French cuisine, and a bicycle house, and perhaps a motor-car or two. And we'll play cards and make apple-pie beds, and turn these noble old rooms into a bear garden, and talk of everything under heaven except what's sensible, or decent. We shall eat nothing that is wholesome because it might agree with us, or distract our attention from the Chartreuse, and *crème de menthe* and *petits verres* that cigarette smoking induces. We shall be so afraid of boredom that we shall overdo everything in the shape of amusement. Oscar and Tony and Lord Chris will vie with each other in the 'unimportance of being—earnest.' And we shall be expected to laugh as if the cleverness of the original was unspoilt by the poor compliment of imitation."

Adèle's own chatter was temporarily suspended till the dress-box was removed into the adjoining room, and Eugénie had departed for refreshment to the servants' hall.

"Do you think George is falling in love with Zara?" suddenly asked Mrs. Brady when they were alone. "I've noticed he is very attentive."

"Have you noticed anything else?" asked Adèle meaningly. Their eyes met.

"Yes—I wonder if you were right?"

"Mrs. Gideon Lee has always had the next

room till now. I am sure she doesn't like the change."

"I'd rather *not* speak about Mrs. Gideon Lee," said Mrs. Brady. "There's something so utterly . . . how can I express it?—snaky, creepy, unnatural about her whole manner, tone, appearance. Has she a husband?"

"They don't agree. She objects to his style of acting and he to hers. She's going to take a theatre of her own, and Chrissy is to write a play for her. I don't really know if he means to do it."

"Do you think he could?"

Adèle laughed. "He could string speeches and make epigrams, and if the actors and actresses would invent their own situations, and a real playwright do the technical part, the thing might be knocked into dramatic shape."

"A modern play with a vengeance."

"I wonder if Trottie will take a theatre for her—now."

"Why—now? Surely if she had intended it before she came into this fortune, there is a better reason for carrying out the idea now that the fortune excuses it."

"Time will show," said Adèle ofacularly. "I'm so glad you snubbed Chrissy to-day. He'll give you abundant opportunities. Don't neglect them."

"I don't intend to. Haven't I our scheme in mind?"

"Alas for the best-laid schemes of mice and men! Oscar makes a fool of himself over me, George is *épris* with Zara, Chrissy is Trottie's 'special,' and Mrs. Gideon Lee is 'parliamentary'; Tony and Basil Warrender fall to our portion, my dear. Shall we cast lots?"

"I want no one," said Mrs. Brady impatiently. "Only I wish——"

"What do you wish, Perry?"

"That George would not be so foolish."

"Men are always foolish when youth and beauty come their way, Perry. And I—I am nearly twenty-eight!"

"You are beautiful and gifted and adorable. I can't understand——"

Adèle's fair face flushed slightly.

"Dearest Per, never try to be a matchmaker. It's a thankless office. The law of physical attraction sets all known rules at defiance. It's a strange thing—I've often thought of it—that sudden, imperative need of one life for another; that dual isolation which is so complete and satisfying—while it lasts. It never does last—long. That reflection is a consolation to baffled rivalry. Now, Per, I'm going to have a rest and sleep before I dress. They're a better *cosmétique* than poor Trottie's massage and complexion washes. We're to wear tea-gowns, by the way. I've a dream in black velvet; sleeves slashed with white satin, and a rope of pearls for girdle. I

look a glorified Mary Stuart in it. And it will just suit this semi-monastic place. What shall you sport?"

"I—oh, I don't signify," said Mrs. Brady, with indifference. "I wonder why Trottié asked me here. I'm quite sure she hates me."

"Hates you? Nonserise!" said Lady Beaudesart sharply. "Why should she?"

"Lookers-on see too much of the game—sometimes. And if the game is one of which they don't approve, then criticism is more to be avoided than invited."

Adèle stood silent for a moment, holding the door ajar. Then she sighed, closed it, and entered her own room.

For long Mrs. Brady sat there, her eyes on the fire, her thoughts travelling swiftly over these past momentous weeks. Supposing she attained her ambition; supposing she had the *entrée* to such houses as bore the seal of "smartness"? What would it benefit her? Feminine rivalry meant the rivalry of beauty or of dress. Madame la Mode was the worshipped ruler of the great world and its various sets. To be the best dressed woman, or the "smartest" woman, bore the sign manual of a distinction that had placed honour and good-breeding in the shade. Dress was a positive craze. Every occasion, however trivial, demanded a special toilet. She knew that Adèle's dressmaker's bills ran into four figures

yearly, without reckoning the hundred-and-one costly adjuncts of boots, laces, flowers, jewels, furs—all that went to make up the necessities of a smart *mondaine*. The modern woman had to keep up with the extravagance of her “set,” or she was an object of ridicule. Full well Mrs. Brady knew that half the Society women were driven to gambling, or betting, or intrigues, in order to get money that their husbands refused. Money to pay peremptory *modistes* their ruinous charges. Money dishonoured in the receipt as in the payment.

It is rarely given to achieve one's ambition with content. Mrs. Brady felt that the glory and the *éclat* and the wonders of this life she had coveted were very disappointing on a close inspection. It took more than a title to make a lady, and more than ancient heritage to create a man of honour. To laugh with and at each other, to be perpetually inventing fads and “crazes,” surely this was a very profitless existence? But it seemed all for which these people were fit, or for which they cared.

The dressing-bell rang, and Eugénie appeared and found her mistress still brooding over the fire; a cloud on her bright face, and a new, almost stern, expression in her eyes.

She little guessed that the said mistress had been taking herself severely to task for drifting into an absurd and discreditable position; that

she knew herself the guest of a woman whom she thoroughly despised, and longed to unmask. True to her nationality, Mrs. Brady had been content with the grasshopper's life of the immediate day. Had laughed, rejoiced, and taken such good things as came in her way. But suddenly the sun seemed to have hidden behind wintry clouds. She looked at a possible grasshopper shivering and homeless under the rime of frosty skies. •

And George?

George was so strangely reserved, so strangely changed. That hope of seeing him wedded to Adèle Beaudesart had been dashed to the ground. Whatever he might do, he would not marry to please his aunt, though he had declared his profession quite incapable of supporting a wife. Why, then, did he allow himself to be drawn into the net of Zara's fascinations? What could come of such attraction but misery to both? Besides—there was Trottie to reckon with." . . .

So *distracted* and troubled was she by these reflections, that Eugénie had to ask her again and again what dress she proposed wearing.

When she at last brought her mind to bear on that important subject her choice astonished the maid.

"Sure, but that's the most gorgeous gown you've got, ma'am," she remonstrated. "And 'twill be just wasted on them to-night, for I heard Mrs. Vanderdecken's own maid (not the loaned

one, ma'am) say that her mistress would be wearing the same tea-gown you saw her in. She calls it a *robe de châtelaine*, whatever that may mean."

"No matter," answered her mistress. "I have my reasons."

Reasons for wearing old rose velvet and Limerick lace, on such an occasion, were beyond Eugénie's comprehension.

She went on with her mistress's toilet, which was singularly simple, as she disdained all *petits secrets*, and wore her own luxuriant hair dressed to suit her face and not a fashion.

"Oh, I must be tellin' ye a joke, ma'am," she exclaimed at last. "Mrs. Vanderdecken ordered that the ladies was to have *rain-water*, in all the bedrooms, for it's so good for the skin, and ye'll all be believin' ye have it, but the maids they couldn't be bothered with such nonsense, and so they put a handful o' some patent water-softener into the jugs, and nary one o' you will be a ha'porth the wiser. 'Sure, the *feel* is the same,' that's what they said, 'and what matters the rest?' Indeed, ma'am, if you come to think of it, it 'ud take more than rain-water to get at the natural skin of sich ladies as Mrs. Gideon Lee and Mrs. Vanderdecken. I'd not be namin' your beautiful Irish complexion in the same breath, ma'am."

Mrs. Brady surveyed herself in the long glass with pardonable pride. Very few, if any, women of thirty of the present day were able to face a room

on their own merits, so to speak; or be independent of face-washes, rouge, powder, eye-darkening, hair-dye, or the fashionable "transformations" of Lichfield or Dupont.

She acknowledged that she *did* look well to-night, and she had a special reason for doing so.

She was the last who swept into the hall where Trottie Vanderdecken, in her gown of trailing olive velvet and old silver ornaments, still played at châtelaine, with Eldorado couched at her feet on a superb cushion of old gold satin.

She looked with cold surprise at her guest's magnificent appearance.

Mrs. Brady had her answer ready for the surprise.

"Dear Mrs. Vanderdecken," she said, "there are occasions on which one dresses purely for people. I felt this was not one of them. I dressed to be worthy of your—house."

The gong sounded. Mrs. Vanderdecken made no reply.

XXIII

"ISN'T Padderini getting a bit cheeky?" inquired Lord Chris, as he waited for his soup, beside his hostess. "I've invented that name. Paddy, you know, masculine—Padderini—feminine."

"Oh, I understand," said Trottie, with an affected laugh. "Cheeky! I don't know. Aren't all Irish people that?"

"I often ask myself," he continued, accepting *bisque* from one of the tall footmen, "if you were wise to open the sheepfold to one—white—bleater? From a hint or two she's dropped I fancy she imagines more than we permit her to see."

"It's all Adèle's fault," said Mrs. Vanderdecken sulkily. "And we couldn't afford to offend *her*, you know." They had spoken in subdued tones under cover of general conversation.

"To say she dressed for your house and not for *you*," continued Lord Chris, "was intended for a snub, I feel certain."

"Oh no, my dear boy," answered Trottie quickly. "It's my belief she only brought one evening dress with her, and couldn't lose an opportunity of sporting it."

"Ah, that's a woman's point of view!"

He finished his soup in a silence complimentary to its composer; and then glanced round the table.

"Ten," he murmured. "And all paired. Tell me, Trottie, aren't you a bit afraid that Zara may take a fancy to George Murphy?"

"But you told me——"

He touched her foot as a discretionary warning.

"He has altered strangely since that concert. He never comes near me now."

Trottie began to feel annoyed. "Really, Chris, your warnings come rather late. Are you bent on spoiling my party? If neither George Murphy nor his aunt can be depended on——"

"So much the better to keep them under our own eyes. I only meant to warn you. I think we might make conversation more general now. What do you say? There's a tendency to duologue that will breed the familiarity that brings content, if you don't disturb it."

Trottie's *bistre* eyes glanced quickly round the circle. "Yes—talk," she said.

Lord Chris always earned his dinners when he chose. On the present occasion he fired conversational pellets into everything that savoured of *tête-à-tête*, and effectually kept George and Basil Warrender from a tendency to speak and listen only to their own respective neighbours.

There was a great deal of nonsense, but it was brilliant nonsense. And, strangely enough, Mrs.

Brady proved capable of keeping the ball flying as rapidly and skilfully as Lord Chris himself. For the first time she descended into the arena instead of surveying it, and proved an efficient combatant. She electrified Trottie, and delighted Adèle, and spurred her epigrammatic rival to his highest efforts.

It was only when the freedom of coffee and cigarettes and liqueurs permitted a certain abandonment of the proprieties, that he felt he must score by impudence if not by wit.

Trottie had abolished the old-fashioned idea of leaving men to their own entertainment, while women bored each other to death in the drawing-room. At her parties there was no ostracism of sex. Neither was anyone supposed to be offended by the men's stories, or shocked by the women's.

Lord Chris had said that "the indecency of language must excuse the decency of ideas." If dictionaries and encyclopædias would insist upon conveying meanings that had no right to be conveyed, a mere *raconteur* was no more blameable than the compiler of the Church Service!

"I have often blushed at the Church Service," he added thoughtfully. "I have never in my life changed colour at one of my own stories."

He caught sight of Zara's deep dark eyes and puzzled face, and prepared to enjoy himself.

"It has occurred to me, Trottie," he went on, "that we could not better inaugurate this occa-

sion and our extremely quaint surroundings than by a return to the entertainments of the *Decameron*. I mean the relating every night of some *historiette* suitable to a cultured and enlightened community, such as this. I exclude Zara. She is, perhaps, too uncultured to bear the trial. Of course, these stories are merely to end up our more rational amusements in the way of music, and ping-pong, and bridge. With a view to your consent I have drafted out a series of incidents founded on items that have appeared in the best Society journals of the day. They will be treated fictionally—by myself. True history is alone worthy of being treated fictionally. I will give the incident, and any one of you may invent the appropriate story, or—you may supply the incident and I will embroider my own fancies on your facts. It strikes me there may be a good deal more instruction to be got out of this than by a perusal of the *Canterbury Tales*, or such literature as one unnaturally associates with mediæval residences, and Elizabethan beds."

Trottie Vanderdecken was enchanted. To make up a modern *Decameron* with one's own friends and acquaintances for characters, was really the most exquisitely original idea that Lord Chris had yet evolved!

She looked round for appreciation, but discovered that her own was enough to justify the scheme. Lord Chris decided that the stories

should be told half an hour before midnight, in order to allow of the adoption of what Trottie called "country hours." It was also decided that Zara should not be present.

Mrs. Brady listened to all this with a face that betrayed nothing of an increasing sense of physical disgust. However, it was no part of her policy to play preacher—as yet. She had come here of her own free will, and she knew she would have to put up with all she heard, saw, or discovered. Meanwhile the contrast between this ancient, beautiful house and the people in it struck her as no contrast of themselves and their surroundings had hitherto done. In London it was amusing, even if senseless. Here it was senseless without being amusing. It occurred to her that there were people who might change their place of residence every fortnight, or month of the year, but never change their lives. They remained just the same in different surroundings. Eating, drinking, smoking, dressing, flirting, gambling, intriguing, making life a pastime or a playground, and ignoring or relegating to stewards, or secretaries, or servants, any of the responsibilities that rank or wealth entailed.

"Mrs. Brady looks as if she were composing a sermon," observed Trottie at last. "I'm afraid she disapproves of us. Oh, my dear people, I forgot to say I've no sort of drawing-room for you. It's been shut up for ages, and is damp, cold,

mouldy, and furnished with nothing but spindle-legged chairs and tables. So we shall have to live in the hall and billiard-room, and take our meals here. The library is all books and book-cases. I haven't been able to do anything with it. If any of you are bibliophiles, you'll find ancient editions of every ancient author that's mentioned in the *Encyclopædia Britannica*. I ordered some boxes from Mudie's of French and English novels, but owing to this dreadful Christmas-time nothing seems to arrive, or get delivered, except turkeys and telegrams. I hope none of you expect Christmas cards. I've given strict orders to burn them indiscriminately. Now that people have taken to inventing their own designs, and then sending them in envelopes with a halfpenny stamp, I consider we owe it to our own self-respect *not* to receive them."

"I'm sorry you reminded us of such a season as Christmas," observed Mrs. Gideon Lee gravely. "I have been doing my utmost to forget it."

"So have I," answered her hostess; "but my old housekeeper would insist on having my orders as to plum-puddings and mince-meat for to-morrow. I gave none, except their abolition from my table. She almost wept. She said in fifty years of service to the old family she had never heard of a Christmas Day without these things. I told her to have as much Christmas fare as she pleased in the servants' hall, but not to insult us with such barbarity."

"You did quite right, Trottie," said Lord Chris. "I should like to have seen the old lady's face, though. Tell me, have you any neighbours here? Calling people, you know? Old manor-houses generally carry an incubus of county importance, just as snails carry their houses on their backs."

"No one has called—yet," said Trottie dubiously; "and I hope to goodness no one will. No class of person is quite so odious as a county dignitary."

"If there's a cleric anywhere about he's sure to call," observed Tony Chevenix. "They always look after the main chance. Organ repairs, and schools, and church restoration, you know. I have a rector in my novel, so I studied them up a bit. They're always boring you about the duty of going to church—their own church, of course—or else begging."

"I thought begging was a crime punishable by law," said Trottie.

"Only if you do it in the street—from necessity," said Lord Chris. "In a church, for merely personal or sacerdotal reasons, it has become a virtue."

"Do you know Father Snatchall? He's such a dear thing and half a Jesuit," observed Mrs. Gideon Lee. "He says it's really wonderful what sums he can get from his congregation. He has a very good salary, but he never has to pay for anything, and dines out every night. He told me once that he had read so much philosophy (or was

it philanthropy? (I can't remember now) that he had never any time to practise it."

"Perhaps he preached it in an equally effectual manner," said Mrs. Brady.

"I don't know," answered Mrs. Gideon Lee thoughtfully. "I never heard him preach. I only used to go to dear little cosy things called 'Vesperettes' that lasted half an hour. They had a beautifully embroidered ritual."

"That's all modern churches give us nowadays. It's so much easier to understand," said Basil Warrender.

"I suppose that's why they print those dear trotty little tracts to explain it," put in Adèle Beau-desart. "I get them by hundreds from Guilds and Leagues and other quaint institutions."

"Do you ever read them?" asked M^{rs}. Brady.

"Only their titles. They're so delightfully suggestive—one doesn't need to look inside."

"Oh, please don't let us get talking about tracts, and churches!" exclaimed Lord Chris pettishly. "It will really make it *seem* like Christmas Eve. Who votes for a gamble?"

There was an instantaneous movement, and they drifted back to the hall.

Card-tables had been set out, and a grand yule log burned in the open fireplace.

"Zara will sing for us," said Trottie. "Herr Poseurenwitz will play her accompaniments. She's only going to sing some simple little ballad things."

"Oscar can play anything!" exclaimed Adèle Beaudesart indignantly. "Really, Trottie, you seem to forget he is an artist."

"Oh no, I don't! I heard him at Zara's concert. Well, if he's too great an artist to play accompaniments, I dare say Chrissy won't mind."

"I—I shall be delighted to play for the young lady," interposed Oscar, who was dying for a chance to get at the piano.

"Well, settle it how you please," said Trottie indifferently. "Now, my dear people, what's it to be—poker, bridge, bac? Who says? Fancy, I've not played a game at cards since I left London!"

"How sweetly innocent you must feel!" observed Lord Chris.

Anything less innocent or less sweet than Mrs. Vanderdecken could hardly be imagined. But she gave a lamb-like frisk towards the card-tables, and said he was getting too fond of paying compliments, and must be put into the corner to repeat "Baa-baa, black sheep" twenty times, unless he promised to be good.

"If I repeat my parody on that hero of the Fleece Funereal," he said gravely, "I think you will allow the other nineteen times to be 'taken as read,' as the lawyers say."

"Well, for goodness' sake," said Mrs. Vanderdecken, shaking the counters eagerly, "let us begin. And remember, at half-past eleven we must cease for the first of Chrissy's Decameronian Fantasies."

XXIV

MRS. BRADY acknowledged to herself that she had never spent such an evening in her life as this first sample of Mrs. Vanderdecken's country-house entertaining. To the card-playing she did not object, being an Irishwoman and loving the excitement as much as the game, but the jests and scandals, the foolish laughter, the perpetual straining after smart witticisms, the incessant "nips" of liqueurs, and whiskies and sodas, made up an element of rowdyism that drowned even Zara's singing and Oscar Poseurenwitz's scraps of Chopin and Schumann and Saint-Saëns.

No one noticed when Zara slipped away, except perhaps George, but as he was somewhat excited by the perpetual flow of champagne and other beverages, he made no remark on the departure of the only apparently sane member of the party, though he accepted its rebuke.

In the midst of the giddy merriment there came a sudden clash of bells ringing in the Christmas morn.

Involuntarily Mrs. Brady dropped her cards.

Lady Beaudesart followed her example. Mrs. Vanderdecken's vague eyes looked out of their bistro shadows as if asking explanation..

"The Christmas bells," said Lord Chris. "We've passed the *Decameron* episode by half an hour!"

"It's never too late to episode," murmured Tony Chevenix, suppressing a tendency to hic-cough.

Trottie sprang impetuously to her feet and swept cards and counters aside.

"The story!" she cried. "Fancy, our forgetting that! Come, draw up your chairs in a circle round the fire, and we'll have it now. So sorry, Chrissy dear, to have wasted half an hour!"

Lord Chris, knowing that he had had quite as much wine and *et ceteras* as were good for him, helped himself to another goblet of whisky and soda in order to prove that he could amalgamate what was—unlikely—to be beneficial. He brought it over to the fireplace and put it down, on a small table by his side.

"I wish those d——d jangling things would stop," he observed, with the perfect good breeding of an age that never hesitates about using strong language in or out of women's presence.

"Oh, don't mind *them*!" said Trottie, nestling into the cushioned depths of her favourite *causeuse*. "We can only allow you half an hour because we really must try to get some beauty sleep while we have a chance. By the way," she added, glancing

round the circle, "I've ordered pure rain-water to be taken into all your rooms (not the men's, of course). You'll find it such a treat after the hard London stuff. They tell me there are pipes and barrels for it laid on here. I don't know anything about that, but I suppose it's all right."

"Undoubtedly all right," said Lord Chris, "but for one comparatively unimportant fact—we've not had any rain for a month."

In the hushed silence that followed his last remark, Lord Chris drew out from his dinner-jacket (an inspiration of one of his artistic moments) a silver-monogrammed notebook, from which dangled a tiny pencil.

All his intimate friends knew that notebook.

He used it to jot down ideas of his own, or the "good sayings" of other people. The latter he called "Themes with Variations." By long practice he had acquired a trick of "varying," that produced many subtle disguises of the original witticism.

When he drew out the little book on this eventful occasion, no one spoke.

His white, slender fingers turned over the leaves with the languid indifference of one accustomed to handle treasures. They paused at last, and he threw back his head with the well-known gesture of the accomplished *raconteur*.

"You may all smoke," he said graciously, "and

I will follow your example. A cigarette is the most admirable form of punctuation that printers and grammarians have—not discovered.

“The first story I propose to introduce to your notice is brief. But its title is long, and it has the advantage of permitting a sequel. I have called it—

“‘The Black Princeling, the Society Lady, and the Legacy of an Eastern Peerage.’”

There was a rustle of astonishment. Trottie Vanderdecken's eyes threw him a sharp, astonished challenge; he answered it with a comprehending nod. Then he lighted a cigarette and closed the book.

“My facts,” he observed, “are culled from one or two of those delightful journals which try to honour us by the strict impartiality they show to the unimportance of Social Position. They call themselves Society chroniclers for the only good and sufficient reason that they know nothing about the Society they chronicle. A short time ago one of these Paul Pry's informed its readers that a certain national occasion had been famous for a remarkable and distinctly uncomfortable series of National Festivities. To these festivities came the flower of chivalry, rank, and wealth of our vaunted empire. The capital was sprinkled with royalties and rank, as plentifully as with policemen to guard them. Naturally, however, the great national protective force only had orders

to guard great Personages from the overtures of mobocracy. It never occurred to the Directing Powers that a *réal garde d'honneur* might have been more serviceable if applied to the social plunderers and titled sirens of another rank of life. Hence—these sighs. For a certain Eastern Princeling—noble, handsome, and possessed of the jewels of Golconda, found favour in the eyes of many lovely and—impecunious—ladies of high degree, and dress-burdened incomes. Great was the replenishment of jewel-boxes that season, and great the self-sacrifices of that noble Eastern youth. It chanced, however, that one frail and Lovely Lady allowed her fancy to exceed her discretion. Her lawful lord was absent—a not unfrequent occurrence of lawful lords who possess lovely wives on whom has fallen the smile of royal favour. . . .”

Mrs. Vanderdecken glanced at Mrs. Gideon Lee, and then at Adèle Beaudesart. “They felt they were quite capable of dotting the “i’s” and crossing the “t’s” of this *historiette*. ”

“There *are* circumstances, however,” continued Lord Chris, “when it is both prudent and convenient for lovely ladies to take their frisks under the protecting shadow of lawful, if only pretended, allegiance. This occasion evidently chose to be the rule of an ignored exception. There was no heir to the noble house, and the only daughter of the Lovely Lady and the obliging and often-

absent lord had seen some seven or eight summers of juvenile neglect. Moons waxed and waned, and the Lovely Lady was rarely seen in the haunts of fashion or the groves of 'country seats.' A tumour spread, growing into wider circles as time went on, and arousing much discreet and matronly interest. It was said that the long-absent lord had returned, and awaited domestic results with true aristocratic composure. A little before the expected time he knew himself the proud possessor of an heir. There was *en passant* a slight confusion of dates, but there had been a cycling craze that season. Now—comes the point of the story. No one outside the impartial circle of near attendants had been permitted to view the new claimant to the Peerage. The head nurse was the soul of discretion. The medical attendant had his own way to make in the world, and possessed that innate belief in the integrity of rank that is one of the main props of our truly great nation.

"A father's feelings may be very disinterested, but he cannot be expected to distinguish points of family resemblance when asked to regard a bundle of flannel in a dim light. (I believe it is a fact that young infants cannot bear a strong light.) However, satisfied that all was well, the noble and lawful lord took his departure for Kamschatka, or some of his beloved sporting regions, and the Lovely Lady was left to bless (or curse) nature, and regain convalescence.

"This, ladies and gentlemen, is the story of the Black Prince and—*et cetera, et cetera*. If any among you can supply the sequel, I shall be happy to yield my place—and become a listener."

There was a brief pause. Suddenly George Murphy sprang to his feet.

"I don't know what you think, Lord Chris," he said, "but I call it a—d—d blackguardly shame to take away any woman's character as you have done. And more damnable still and more blackguardly to ask anyone else to second you!"

Mrs. Brady had also risen. "I quite agree with you, George," she said. "Even if it were true——"

Lord Chris gave a tipsy laugh, and swallowed the contents of his tumbler.

"Oh, dash it all, what humbugs you are! You know it is true, and the best part was to come—the exchange at the Hospital!"

"Allow me to wish you good night, Mrs. Vanderdecken," said Mrs. Brady.

Amidst dead silence she walked away, and up the great dim staircase.

"You were a bit too *salate*, Chris," said Basil Warrender, also rising; "and it's late enough to say good night."

There was a general move. Mrs. Vanderdecken rose. She was a little surprised that the room

seemed to rise also, as if inspired by a sudden ambition to touch the ceiling. ¶

“I regret,” she said in a preternaturally slow and solemn voice, “that we have succeeded in shocking anyone’s feelings. I had believed it to be—impossible. Chris sometimes oversteps the borders. • I wish you all good night.”

She sank back into her chair, feeling suddenly unequal to the task of mounting the stairs.

Lord Chris remained with her.

XXV

ADELE BEAUDESART came into Mrs. Brady's room, close upon her own entrance. She looked somewhat disconcerted.

"My dear," she said, "if you and George fly out like this, it will make it very unpleasant for the rest of us."

"Why do you blow hot and cold, Adèle?" exclaimed her friend impatiently. "Do you forget what you said to me about these people and their ways not many days ago?"

"I remember perfectly, but I can't ram my opinions down their throats. Unfortunately they think I'm as bad as they are."

"And George?" said Mrs. Brady suddenly. "What about George? Do they think the same of him?"

"He and Lord Chris were always together until you appeared on the scene."

Mrs. Brady remembered that talk in his chambers, his reluctance that she should join this set.

"I'm not *ultra-thinskin*ned, Adèle," she exclaimed, "and I know the world pretty well ;

but I think it's too much to expect of any decent-minded woman to sit and listen to such a story as Lord Chris told us."

"But he said he got it from the papers."

"One can read a scandalous *canard*, and form one's own opinion. It is a very different thing to have it repeated with bald, bare indecency before a mixed assemblage."

Lady Beaudesart threw herself down in a chair by the fire.

"I wonder," she said, "if there's any amusement to be got out of any *canard* that isn't scandalous, and isn't indecent. I've heard a good many in my time, Perry, from men and from women, but they were all flavoured with the *sauce piquante* of impropriety. I think impropriety is the soul of English humour. People laugh a great deal more at what is shocking than at what is witty. That story of Lord Chrissy's has been going about for some time, a sign of the survival of the unfittest. I happen to know that the sequel is worse even than the story. It was told me by a nurse who——"

A low tap at the door interrupted her. It was Eugénie. Adèle rose with a yawn.

"Well, my dear, I'd better wish you good night. I wonder how we shall sleep in these strange old beds. I hope I have a supply of logs like you to keep my fire in. I'd be terrified to wake in the dark here."

She kissed Mrs. Brady. "You mustn't worry about to-night; they'll have forgotten all about it to-morrow. Chrissy was a little bit 'on,' I think, and Trottie wasn't much better. They'll be helping each other up to bed presently. That's quite a frequent occurrence at country houses, and quite excusable on Christmas Eve."

She laughed and went away, closing the door behind her.

Eugénie removed her mistress's lovely gown, and gave her a wrapper before proceeding to uncoil and brush out her hair.

"I don't know what you think of this place, ma'am," she observed, glancing at Mrs. Brady's serious face, "but, in my opinion, it's perfectly scandalous! The things as I've heard to-night! I could make a fortune by sending them to the Society papers, if I dared."

"I shouldn't advise you to dare, Eugénie," said her mistress wearily. "Nothing would alter these people. Nothing would shame them. If you try to rebuke their follies they only call you disagreeable and old-fashioned, and leave you out of their visiting list."

Eugénie was used to her mistress's frank confidences, but she had never seen her in quite so serious a mood as to-night, or heard her so bitter against that world of fashion and Society whose notice she had hitherto coveted. She wondered whether the "eye-openers" above stairs had been

as *risqué* as those of the servants' hall. Whether a "gentleman's gentleman" was not usually better than his master, or a lady's maid a degree or two more respectable than the titled aristocrat who forgot her wages and tried her temper. Revelations had been so very candid, and the names discussed so very honoured by Debrett,

She brushed away in silence, while the cloud deepened over her mistress's brow, and anxiety and serious disturbance robbed her face of its usual *bonhomie*.

"I wouldn't be takin' sich things to heart, ma'am," she said cheerfully. "Sure there's good, and bad fish swimmin' in the same waters, and some save themselves by eatin' others, some are caught, and some the gulls do be eatin'. But there's the water, and there's the fish, and there's the gulls every season, and as they've been so they will be till the end of the world. Wasn't folks eatin' and drinkin' and marryin' in the days of Noah?—and the very sight of the blessed ark didn't preach a warnin'! And sure, 'tis just the same now. These fine ladies and gintlemen don't believe in God nor heaven nor hell, nor anything but themselves. Playing with counters at the grave's mouth they'd be, as Lord Christopher's own valet was sayin', and he's been bond-slave to his lordship for ten long years."

Mrs. Brady roused herself from her moody reflections.

She had been utterly surprised by George's outburst, and no less astounded that Lord Chris in no way resented it. She wondered if they ought to leave the Hall; cut short their visit. One could hardly live under the roof and accept the hospitality of a hostess after insulting her chosen guest. Lord Chris was pre-eminent here, and master of the revels. Every night he would continue this series of stories, every night she must listen, or seem to censure the amusement by absence.

Adèle had never hinted what she was to expect, but even Adèle thought the proceedings of this evening unusual. And Adèle was more used to country-house visiting than herself.

To be thrown into daily and hourly intimacy with people she despised and yet in some vague way -- feared, was not a pleasant reflection on which to sleep.

She dismissed Eugénie somewhat curtly, with directions to call her at nine o'clock, and then locked her door and retired to the recesses of the four-poster. It was deliciously warm and comfortable, and the fire threw a rich glow over the room. The house was very silent, and through the silence came the sound of a clock striking two. Mrs. Brady buried her head in the great square pillows and tried to sleep.

It was all very well for idiotic faddists to form themselves into a society for preventing sleep, prescribing four-hour doses at a stretch, but an

active, healthy woman knew exactly how she would feel and look without seven or eight at the least.

The warmth and the quiet, and the excitement of the evening following a long day of travelling, were very conducive to repose, and Mrs. Brady soon yielded to the drowsy sense of recompensed fatigue.

It seemed to her that she had slept for hours, when she was conscious of being suddenly roused to alert and inexplicable wakefulness.

She sat up and stared about her. An impression of unreality gradually merged into full consciousness of strange surroundings. She remembered she was not in the familiar bedroom of Mount Street, but under the roof of Trottie Vanderdecken.

The fire had died down into a deep, steady glow. It showed the room and its vast spaces and dusky corners, and strange, old-fashioned furniture. But all her senses seemed concentrated in her ears. A sound had awakened her. What sound? It had seemed like a cry, a half-muffled scream, the sharp sound of a closing door.

And then—had she dreamt it, or was someone turning the handle of her own door, sobbing breathlessly, "Let me in! Let me in!"

She scarcely knew what impulse made her spring from the bed to the floor, and throw it open. Crouched on the rug was a white-shrouded figure. It lifted its face.

Mrs. Brady saw it was Z̄ara.

"What is the matter?" she asked.

For all answer the girl sprang into the room, then closed and locked the door. Her eyes were wild, her breath came in deep, panting gasps. She seemed as one possessed by rage and terror commingled.

"Come to the fire and sit down," urged Mrs. Brady. "What has frightened you so?"

Suddenly a memory of the haunted room recurred to her. Had Z̄ara, perhaps, seen the supposed apparition?

The girl was shivering in her thin night robe. Mrs. Brady wrapped her own wadded satin gown around her and gently drew her to a chair. Then she lit the candles on the dressing-table, got into another wrapper, and came to the side of the agitated girl.

"What is it, my dear?" she asked again. "What has frightened you?"

Z̄ara clasped her hands before her face and rocked herself to and fro, muttering incoherent German phrases. After a few moments she grew quieter, and Mrs. Brady gathered that something, someone had entered her room, bent over her, wakened her with horrible whispers. She had started up and a hand had closed her lips; and still the same whisperings went on.

"It was dark . . . I could not see; could not tell if dreaming I was. Then—quite of a sudden,

I know who it is. I grow still, and listen. It seems as if something in my brain tell me, 'Keep quiet, so best you escape.' And the whispers went on and on. Then I know! . . . All, everything—how it come back to me! I feel that shriek I must, and both my hands strike—*so*——” She rose, and then threw tense white arms and clenched hands forward with a sudden, violent gesture. “*So*,” she went on, trembling from head to foot, “and the strength of a hundred devils is in me. I hurl it—the figure—far away, and I fly to you. For something—what—I know not, says to me you are the only clean, good woman in this horrible house!”

“But, Zara, my dear girl, what was it that so terrified you? Did they give *you* the haunted room? The ghost——”

“*Der geist!*” exclaimed Zara. “*Aber so was!* Do I fear? Am I a baby, that one say, ‘A bogey will come and eat you up’? Ah, madame, how can I *speake*? Is it that you do *not verstehen?*”

She glanced wildly round.

“*Ach, na-na!* I do not stay here in this house, not one hour after to-night, and I want you to take me away. Promise. Oh, say that it is you will, and I . . . I will tell you why.”

“Take you away? My dear Zara, how can I promise such a thing? Mrs. Vanderdecken

is your guardian, your protectress. How can I interfere?"

"You will, if you are a good woman. You will, if you know what I have to tell. Listen——"

She bent forward and whispered something in Mrs. Brady's ear. -

XXVI

SEEN in the daylight of a crisp, December morning the Weard Hall was a wide, imposing structure, with mullioned windows and a high-gabled roof.

The bricks were neither red nor brown, but of that curious mellow tint which is the work of centuries. Masses of creepers and ivy hid a great portion of the walls, and darkened many of the windows. The grounds looked as if they had been left more to their own devices than the art of the gardener. Yew hedges and planted alleys recalled vanished days of hoops and powder; the terrace was grassy and weed-grown, and lichen covered the stone balustrades and the great urns, bare now of floral beauties.

The Hall stood on a hill, and around it were thick groves of beech and oak that in summer time must have completely hidden the house from the public highway beyond. It was thicket and forest combined, and, like the Hall, showed signs of long neglect.

George Murphy, standing on the terrace in the bright clear morning, thought to himself that

Mrs. Vanderdecken's heritage was as much in need of repair as Mrs. Vanderdecken herself. He paced to and fro before the silent house. None of its inmates seemed astir, save a few sleepy servants.

He had slept badly, and the first hint of sunlight was welcome. He had dressed and left the house, and now stood drinking in the sharp, clear air with lungs grown weary of London fogs, and London's dreary winter days.

He left the terrace and made his way into an ancient garden shut in by that clipped hedge of yew. So sheltered and so warm was it that late roses still bloomed, and hardy annuals lifted bright, defiant heads to the blue sky above. The sun fell straight into this quaint nook, threading the open aisles with golden stitches, tracing light and shadow into a chequered pattern that gave a weird beauty to the neglected paths.

The young man stood suddenly still, his hands clasped behind him, every sense eagerly drinking in the treasures of the air and sunshine.

He was thinking of the senseless sacrifices—one made for the sake of Society. Life, health, vigour, purity—these were Nature's offerings, and men and women spurned them for crowded cities, unhealthy rooms, senseless amusements—all the follies that made up the life of to-day.

He was on the point of strolling further when the sound of his own name made him turn. He

saw his aunt hurrying along the path he had just traversed.

Amazed, he stopped still to await her.

"George!" she cried breathlessly. "Oh, what a godsend—meeting you like this! I saw you from my window, and I hurried after you as fast as I could."

She stopped, panting from the haste she had made. "My dear boy, I've something awful to tell you. I hardly know how to do it."

He turned very pale. "Zara?" he said abruptly.

Mrs. Brady nodded. "It's about her—yes. How could you guess it? George, she insists on leaving here, and leaving with *me*."

"With you? But you're not going away till the week's up."

"If this were not Christmas Day, I'd leave to-day," she answered. "I have regretted many things in my life, George, but never anything so much as that I let Adèle persuade me to come *here*." She glanced around as if she feared being overheard.

"I can't tell you; I can't explain. Only I have discovered that no young girl should live under Trottie Vanderdecken's guardianship. . . . I—I had to keep Zara with me last night."

The angry colour surged in a crimson wave to George Murphy's brow.

"My God!" he said, "is it worse than I thought?"

"It's pretty bad, I think," said Mrs. Brady gravely. "Of course, I am in a most awkward position. I must give out that Zara slept in the haunted room, and was so terrified that she is quite ill."

"They will wonder why she came to you instead of to her natural protectress."

"She escaped by the door opening into the corridor, and my room was the first."

"Is she really—ill, Aunt Perry?" he asked in a low, stern voice.

"She would not go to bed until daybreak, and then I had to give her some soothing drops. Fortunately I had some. I haven't had an hour's sleep myself, but that doesn't matter. She's safe in my room, and Eugénie is with her. I threw on my tweeds and came out the moment I saw you. George, what is to be done?"

He had never seen his handsome, worldly relative so perturbed and so serious. He knew that to leave the Hall suddenly would mean something of a scandal; and yet to invent a reasonable excuse was no easy matter.

"You are leaving a good deal to my imagination," he said at last. "Certainly, two—if not more—of our party last night were scarcely responsible for their actions. Chrissy's blackguardly stories and Mrs. Vanderdecken's odd manner have quite a natural explanation. But if the results——"

"I assure you, George, I am on the horns of a dilemma. If I do not take Zara with me, she declares she will run away, kill herself—anything sooner than remain under this roof! I don't wish a scandal; I'm sure Trottie doesn't. I shall have to see her; and of all the interviews it has been my lot to face, I never dreaded one so much as I do this."

"I can quite imagine that. But I am equally sure that Mrs. Vanderdecken dreads it more."

"Oh, I suppose she remembers nothing of what happened. Adèle told me she takes some dreadful drug. It gradually destroys all moral sense and all memory. She's like a log for hours; no one can waken her. I suppose that's why she's so strange and has such odd cranks. It must be the after-effects of this stuff."

"I'm afraid she's not exceptional," said George gloomily. "The drug mania is permeating all ranks of society. I know Lord Chris takes cocaine. He told me so himself; in fact, he wanted me to try it, but I wouldn't. Still, this has nothing to do with the case in point. Has Zara really no relations—no one to whom she could appeal?"

"She says not. She was brought up in this home that Mrs. Vanderdecken founded in some obscure part of the *Schwarzwald*. The girls are trained for service, or anything for which they show special talent. Zara says she never remem-

bers a time when she could not sing, and Trottie had her voice trained most carefully."

"Why not try to gain independence by her gift? Surely if any of the musical directors in London heard her, they would give her engagements."

"No doubt. But not paying ones. And where could she live? She is too young and much too beautiful to be thrown on her own resources."

"That's true," he said, kicking the gravel with his foot, as he stood by the rose-walk. He was silent for a moment, and Mrs. Brady, looking at his face, thought how aged and troubled it appeared in the clear light of day.

"Let us walk on," she said presently. "The question has to be considered from many points. I confess I was so touched by the girl's misery and helplessness that I promised to help her, irrespective of anyone's opinion. However, I can hardly expect Trottie Vanderdecken to yield her up, even temporarily, without a struggle."

"If you care to burden yourself with Zara, and she wants to be with you, you can silence any objection on Mrs. Vanderdecken's part."

She looked up quickly. "I see what you mean. But such an arrangement could only be temporary."

His face flushed again. He drew a long, deep breath.

"I—love Zara," he said passionately. "If she

could care for me—sometimes I have hoped it—there would be a solution of the difficulty.”

“George! Oh, my dear boy, it would be madness. Your prospects, your career!”

“A little self-sacrifice would enable us to live, at least comfortably. And if she chose to exercise her gift, I am not too proud to permit it. Aunt Perenna, I am so sick of shams and pretences, of all this jargon of culture, these gilded vices, this useless eternal round of pleasure! I have tried it, and tested it, and I know the rottenness underneath. A good spell of hard work, an effort to face the responsibilities of life—these would be a thousand times more satisfactory to me.”

Mrs. Brady looked at him despairingly. .

“You hardly know this girl, my dear. You have fallen in love with her beautiful face, and therefore credit her with a corresponding nature. But, for Heaven’s sake, don’t rush into a rash marriage. Think of her bringing up; the life she has lived under Mrs. Vanderdecken’s roof! Her ignorance of religion, her wild gipsy blood! Oh, George, pray don’t talk of such a thing as marrying her!”

Force of feeling carried her away. Tears were in her fine bright eyes, and her voice was unsteady from emotion. .

“Wait,” she entreated. “Let me consider what is best to do. And do not speak to Zara about your feelings. You will only alarm her.

She is, absolutely without any sort of girlish romance. She dislikes men, and after last night—the shock, the horror she has endured—you would only drive her from you. I promise you that if it is in my power to help you, I will do so. I will give you opportunities of becoming better acquainted. You know absolutely nothing of her at present. Remember the old adage, ‘A young man married is a man that’s marred.’ Early marriages are usually imprudent. Love is very beautiful and very alluring; I grant. But you can’t live on it. And it’s not fair to drag a girl into poverty and distress merely because you think you are in love with her!”

“How eloquent!” laughed George. “One would think I had been accepted and the banns published! My dear aunt, I’m not quite a fool, I hope; I have no desire to bring troubles and distresses upon the woman I love. I know I can trust you. You have been my best friend all my life. I am sure you would act as you thought best for Zara’s happiness and welfare, as well as for mine.”

“Indeed, George, I would. You have been dear as any son to me, and I would do anything in the world to make you happy.”

“Then,” he said quickly, “get that poor girl away from these hateful influences. And do it by giving Trottie Vanderdecken the facer she deserves!”

XXVII

MOST of the women breakfasted in their own rooms. Mrs. Brady, George, Basil Warrender, and Oscar Jones alone appeared in the dining-room, and exchanged Christmas greetings. Nothing was said about the symposium of the previous night, but a certain constraint seemed to have fallen on them, and conversation was desultory and kept strictly to commonplaces.

Their commands were asked by one of the tall footmen as to vehicles, or horses, or bicycles.

George decided to ride, Oscar and Basil Warrender chose the "wheel," and Mrs. Brady announced that she would explore the grounds.

When she went up to her room she found Zara still asleep, and Eugénie on duty.

"The maids was mighty surprised when I said they must leave the room alone," she informed her mistress. "And they asked whaiter the young lady was a doin' here. I just tould thim 'she'd had a fright; thought she heard or saw something in the dead o' night, and flew straight in here, and you had all the work in the world to quiet her, and she couldn't be got to sleep till mornin'. I

saw Mrs. Vanderdecken's own maid comin' out of her room, and she said her mistress was in one o' them deep sleeps that she goes into, odd times, and 'twould be no manner o' use tryin' to waken her. She won't be showin' herself downstairs till evening. Sure, ma'am, and it's a strange hay-thénish way o' spendin' Christmas Day. What are you going to do with yourself, ma'am?"

Mrs. Brady was extremely doubtful. She wondered when Adèle would 'be visible. She must explain something of these occurrences to her. Her fixed intention was to leave on the morrow, but, before she could do so, an explanation with her hostess was inevitable. It would have to take place before dinner; as soon, in fact, as Mrs. Vanderdecken had repaired the ravages of time and dissipation.

She wrote a brief note to the effect that she desired a few words privately with that lady, when she was at liberty to spare her a quarter of an hour. This note she directed Eugénie to give to the confidential maid. It might be hours before it was answered; it might even not be answered at all, but it was a relief to despatch it.

The fire had been raked and fed with fresh pine logs. The room was warm and comfortable. She resolved to wait there until Zara awoke, or Adèle Beaudesart appeared. Although their rooms adjoined, the walls were too thick to allow of any sound penetrating, and she hardly liked to knock and ask for admission.

As she sat moody and dejected, going over plans and projects and unable to decide on any, Zara suddenly awoke.

She started up and stared wildly about her, pushing back her loose, disordered hair.

Mrs. Brady rose instantly and approached her.

"You have had a long sleep," she said. "I hope you feel better."

Zara looked at her, as if making an effort to recall the circumstances that had brought her to this unfamiliar room. As memory returned she seemed to hold back her previous agitation with intense self-restraint. The marble whiteness of her face, her dry, bright eyes, her slow-measured speech, were to Mrs. Brady almost unnatural. She would have preferred tears, tremor, any natural girlish emotion, to such merciless composure.

The girl expressed a desire to get up and dress, so Mrs. Brady left her to Eugénie's care. That useful handmaid had discovered that the door of the girl's room was unlocked, so it was easy to procure her clothes and toilet accessories.

Mrs. Brady wandered back to the hall, and found it still deserted. Just as the clock was striking twelve, however, Adèle appeared, dressed in a short cloth walking skirt and hat as if bound for an open-air excursion.

"Oh, at last!" cried Mrs. Brady impulsively. "I think, Adèle, I have never longed quite so

much to see another woman as to see you this morning!"

"Why—what has happened?"

"Tell me, did you hear anything last night—any sound, any noise?"

"Don't tell me there is a ghost after all! My dear, I heard nothing. I was tired out. I fell asleep directly and never woke till an hour ago. But what is it? You look——"

"Come out into the garden, Adèle, I have something very serious to tell you—something that has determined me on leaving here to-morrow. I would go to-day, only it's Christmas Day, and the quick trains are off."

"My dear Perry, going away? Why, what in Heaven's name has happened?"

"Come out with me, I don't like to speak here. Besides, at any moment we might be interrupted." Sobered by her friend's undisguised earnestness and troubled face, Adèle followed her out to the terrace, and thence to the quiet enclosure of the rose garden.

In a few hurried words Mrs. Brady told her of the events of the night and of Zara's resolve. For once Adèle Beaudesart was taken aback, shaken out of her usual fashion of treating serious things with lightness.

"Oh, but you mustn't leave! On no account do such a thing!" she exclaimed. "It would be so unwise, so impolite. Trottie would never for-

give you, and she would never allow Zara to accompany you. Wait; let me think out a plan. This is a question of policy, my dear. We must meet guile with guile. Zara has, perhaps, exaggerated things. She is high-strung and emotional. And Trottie, under the influence of that awful drug she will take, is sometimes very odd. But it's astonishing how she can pull herself together. Besides, she's bad as an enemy. Her influence is enormous, and no direct scandal has ever touched her. She won't allow it. You must see that by accepting her invitation you've, in a measure, accepted herself on her own—demerits. A few days can make no difference. If you really wish to serve Zara——”

“I do. I'm deeply interested in her.”

“Well, making an open enemy of Trottie is the very worst way to begin. If you must explain——”

“How is it possible to avoid an explanation?”

“One can always avoid what is unpleasant if one tries. But if you wish to let Trottie know what you suspect, there is a way of doing it which would be very much to your advantage; in fact, give you the whip hand of *her*. I never counsel rash measures. Women of our world, my dear, have to hang together like links in a chain. There may be weak links and rusty links, odd shapes and conditions of links; but so long as the chain holds against the strain of outside

"criticism, so long do we keep our prestige. After all, we're not half so bad as the men; and it's their treatment and their example that are to blame for our vices."

Mrs. Brady listened with some recognition of the worldly wisdom thus expressed.

"But that poor girl," she said at last. "I cannot abandon her to the tender mercies of such a woman. Besides, I've promised——"

"There's no reason why you shouldn't keep your promise."

"How? . . . You mean——"

"I mean that you can give Trottie to understand that Zara would like to pay you a visit during her absence in Egypt."

"I thought she was not going to Egypt?"

"Women change their minds very rapidly. It would be for you to suggest. I think it's not unlikely the scheme might commend itself."

"I was thinking of returning to Ireland," said Mrs. Brady.

"Take Zara with you. Trottie will provide the sinews of war."

"You seem very confident. But it's a horribly unpleasant business."

"That's true enough. I don't envy you. But I'm advising you for the best. Of course, you've said nothing to anyone else?"

Mrs. Brady coloured faintly. She thought of what she had betrayed to George.

"Naturally I should not speak of it," she answered.

"Don't," said Adèle Beaudesart earnestly. "There are more ways than one of extricating oneself from an unpleasant situation, and if I know anything of you, you will enjoy turning the tables upon our friend. The game lies in your hands now. Play it for all it's worth, my dear Per. That's my advice. I grant it's not noble, or heroic, but it's wise. You've everything to lose by plain speaking, but also you've everything to gain by diplomacy. Be diplomatic for once."

The old glow and brightness returned to Mrs. Brady's face. Adèle had gauged her correctly. The possibility of a passage of arms with Trottie Vanderdecken was far from unpleasing. It would be no mean triumph to defeat such an adversary, and win even the temporary guardianship of Zara. And now that she was calmer and could look at the matter through Adèle's eyes, she saw how very awkward an *esclandre* would be. She had associated herself voluntarily with these people, and must put up with them till the week was over. After that—well, Fate must decide the issue of events.

The position was not quite what one would call heroic. Had she followed her first instincts, she would have been better pleased with herself. But also those instincts would have led to open warfare and the absolute destruction of her present

social success. She would have benefited neither George nor herself. It would have been easier to shake the dust of this community off her feet and go forth to a purer, cleaner life than to accept the hospitality rendered contemptible by her newly-acquired knowledge. This ancient, beautiful house seemed desecrated by its present occupant; a mere background for vicious follies and insane habits. Yet it was beautiful and luxurious, and life rolled on velvet wheels for the masqueraders. Just for a few days more she would be one of them, and act her part as she had acted it up to the present moment. Then she would give herself the relief of speaking her mind to her hostess, without fear of consequences.

Suddenly she remembered the note despatched to Mrs. Vanderdecken! There would have to be an explanation this very day. The thought sobered her, and brought her once again to the feet of consequences.

And Zara? Who could be answerable for the mood or passion of that impulsive creature? Who persuade her to stay on for the rest of the week? She thought of George. He might have some influence, but would he choose to exercise it? Would he agree that diplomacy was the best course of action?

Adèle's voice roused her at last to a sense of the long silence that had followed on her words.

"What clue have you been following through

such a long maze?" she asked. "Your face was a study in contradictions."

"I was wishing I had not written that note to Trottie," answered Mrs. Brady.

Adèle started slightly. "You wrote? You did not tell me that."

"I forgot at first. The truth is, Adèle, something had to be done about Zara, and I asked Trottie to see me as soon as she was dressed."

"I understand. Well, you did quite right. An explanation was inevitable. Only, if this is one of her bad days, she won't be visible till the evening. Where is Zara?"

"In my room. She refused to come downstairs."

"I think I will have a talk with her," said Adèle Beaudesart suddenly. "I know something about girls. I know what I went through—once. This is a crisis in her life. A great deal will depend on it."

"Everything will depend on it," said Mrs. Brady. And she told her friend of George's confession.

Adèle's face grew paler as she listened. The news was totally unexpected, and it came as something of a shock. It said a great deal for the innate courage and nobility of a character she had done her best to deny, that after the first shock she bore no resentment to the unconscious offenders. That Zara's wild bizarre loveliness and wonderful

gifts had made conquest of this cold youth was only the answer to one of life's problems; only another assurance that the undesirable always happens.

In a measure the situation was complicated, and yet rendered easier by the complication. Trottie was rich, and Zara was her daughter by adoption. If Zara married she would surely not come portionless to her husband. Here again came Mrs. Brady's opportunity. The skein was unravelling in quite an orthodox manner. All things tended to "corner" Trottie, and having many an ancient score to wipe off against her, Adèle Beau-desart was not exactly grieved that a day of reckoning was at hand.

"She has brought it on herself," she thought, and a spasm of disgust shook her from head to foot as she walked to and fro in the warm sunshine.

Long and earnest was the colloquy between the two women, and when at last they turned towards the house, it seemed to both as if the mantle of Frivolity and Folly had slipped from off their long-burdened shoulders for ever. Whatever life held in the future, it could never again be purposeless, senseless, irresponsible.

XXVIII

AS they entered the hall a footman advanced and handed a note to Mrs. Brady. She guessed instinctively from whom it came, and answered Adèle's questioning glance with a nod.

Very brief were the contents. Mrs. Vanderdecken would see her in her own room at five o'clock. That left luncheon and the afternoon to be disposed of. Mrs. Brady went up to Zara, and found her dressed and sitting by the fire.

She begged the girl to come down to luncheon. It would look so odd remaining here all the day. Besides, she wanted to place her in George's charge for the afternoon in furtherance of that plan of campaign arranged between Adèle and herself.

She had great difficulty, however, in persuading Zara, but her arguments at last succeeded, and they entered the dining-room together. All the party were there, with the exception of the hostess herself. A perceptible restraint, however, was evident in conversation and manner. George was very silent, and Zara almost dumb. Adèle

Beaudesart and Mrs. Brady vainly tried to jest and talk in their usual fashion. It was too much of an effort not to *seem* an effort. Even Lord Chris suffered from the general depression, and his vapid insincerities had a more than usually hollow ring.

It was a relief to all when the meal was over, and the party broke up with quite unprecedented alacrity.

Mrs. Brady approached her nephew. "I want you to take Zara for a walk," she said. "Keep her out; try and lift this cloud from her mind. I am to see Mrs. Vanderdecken this evening. I can tell you nothing of my plans till then."

She captured Zara, and bade her put on a hat and coat, and a few moments later saw her safely despatched under George's protection.

It was the first time they had ever walked together, and the young man was conscious of a certain embarrassment. It soon wore off, however, and thanking Fate for an unexpected chance, he did his best to charm his companion from her silent and preoccupied mood. He won her to speak of her childhood among woods and mountain heights, her love of nature, her artistic ambitions; and he told her of the effect her singing had had on him on the first occasion he had heard her.

"I am glad of that," she said simply, "for it was for you I sang. I looked for your face every time."

"Why did you do that?" he asked, conscious of sudden hopefulness.

"Because it said to me something that no other said. I know, though, that you were not much liking my second songs, and you went away, *nicht wahr?*"

He looked slightly confused. "I had no right to criticise, of course, yet I must confess I did *not* like to hear you singing those passionate love songs. They seemed unsuitable."

"In art nothing is unsuitable that one can imagine, or express."

"Ah, that is what you hear so constantly. I can't agree with you. I never can understand why women persist in singing songs whose words and sentiments are only suitable to a man. It's as bad art as for men to sing songs only suitable to women. The instances are innumerable."

"Ah, *mein Herr*, I am very ignorant. I have been taught but one thing well, and that is music, but not the music of your land, not the songs that here are heard. What I learn for my concert was chosen for me. The words I hardly understood. Your friend the Lord 'Chris,' as I do hear him called, he insist that I sing his song, and of course I obey. Once I am free, once I gain my own living, as I intend, I shall take care I do not sing what is not suitable. But that time may be long to come."

She sighed, and the white beauty of her face

grew wearied and saddened. His heart gave a quick throb, but he dared not express more than sympathy—yet.

“You wish,” he said, “to sing in public? It is a very arduous and a very uncertain profession, that of the woman artist. So many failures, so few triumphs. Not that I should prophesy failure for you. Your voice is exquisite, but to gain a hearing, to *make* a public, these are more difficult than you imagine.”

They had wandered on, and now left the grounds by a little latched gate and found themselves on the high-road. From the crest of the hill the sea was plainly visible, blue, sparkling, waveless, under the warm sunshine of this mild afternoon.

Zara gave a little cry of delight.

“The sea! Oh, let us go to it! It is so long, so long since I have heard its song, and there is nothing on earth that I love so much!”

* * * * *

The afternoon seemed endless to Mrs. Brady. She had never known hours so long and so hard to pass. But at last the clock chimed five, and she opened her door and crossed to that opposite one, behind which lurked the elements of a tragedy.

As she knocked the key was turned, and Mrs. Vanderdecken's French maid opened it.

The room was dimly lit; a tea-table stood

spread by the fireplace; and in the deep, low chair drawn up before it Trottie lay back with half-closed eyes, and a face too lined and haggard for even rouge to disguise. She wore a loose wadded wrap of pale pink satin; her hair was fresh from the maid's attentions, and the art of curling-irons.

Mrs. Brady came up to her, and stood looking down in silence.

"Will you send your maid away, Mrs. Vanderdecken?" she said at last. "I think our interview would be better without witnesses."

The drooped lids opened suddenly. Fear, question, apprehension, flashed out of the glassy eyes before they veiled themselves once more.

"You need not wait, Victorine," she said. "I will ring when I want to finish dressing."

Then she turned to her visitor. "Won't you sit down?" she said. "And please pour out some tea for yourself. I am still suffering . . . my wretched nerves. A sleepless night always upsets me!"

Mrs. Brady declined tea, but took a chair.

"I suppose you were surprised when you received my note," she said. "Or—perhaps—you guessed what I wished to speak about?"

"No," answered Trottie carelessly. "I did not trouble about it. Why should I? I knew if you had anything important to say I should hear it in due time. Have you?"

"Zara Eberhardt came to my room last night for—protection.. I kept her with me. I learnt from her terror what I was too blind and, happily for myself, too innocent to suspect. Need I say more?"

Mrs. Vanderdecken gave a short, insolent laugh.

"You mean about the ghost? I've no doubt she was terrified, but surely you need not look so tragic. It was only a joke."

"People's ideas of a joke vary a good deal. Zara told me plainly what this so-called ghost said to her."

Again the eyes flashed furtively. "Poor little fool! She was too terrified to understand. It was very wrong of Chris, I know, but he only meant to play a trick. He was a little *en l'air* last night. The champagne—and—one thing and another. It was altogether very silly, I know, but Zara should keep her door locked."

"The outer door *was* locked. The ghost, if you desire to keep up this farce, could only have come through your room."

Mrs. Vanderdecken frowned. How annoying this woman was! And why did she want to make a fuss about nothing? Her drug-burdened memory recalled but vaguely what had happened. Only the ghost's habit of walking the corridor had been the last thing discussed. She felt too ill and upset to argue. She began to wish she had refused the

interview. The woman seemed bent on worrying her, and her nerves were too unstrung to bear worry. How horrible plain speaking was, and in what bad taste!

"My dear woman," she said irritably, "pray tell me what you want or what you mean! I'm really quite at a loss to understand you."

Mrs. Brady leant forward in her chair, and for the space of two minutes spoke without interruption. When she had finished, Mrs. Vanderdecken was left in no doubt as to what she *meant*, or what she wanted.

A ghastly face raised itself from the pink cushions, and pallid lips uttered denial that was palpably useless.

The hearer of the excuses laughed scornfully. "You may save your invention in this instance. I never speak plainly without good reason."

— "I—I can remember nothing."

"Because you chose to drug your senses. I give you the benefit of the doubt as far as *intent* goes. But Zara will not live under your roof another day, unless I bid her do so. And if I do, it is merely to save scandal—a very unpleasant scandal, too!"

"Such talk is preposterous! There is nothing to prove."

"Harm may be done by accusation as well as by proof. It is not so many years ago that a

reputation, supremely reckless by right of its own audacity, was blasted in a moment; torn down from its seat of authority, and trampled into the mud and mire of men's condemnation. Such a thing may happen again."

"You—would not dare! You—a mere nobody! Who would give you a moment's credence?"

"Not your set, I suppose. But you must remember that *that* is but a very infinitesimal portion of the world at large."

"I suppose I am to look upon you as an enemy. Yet why should you interest yourself in this girl? She can be of no possible use to you, whereas my influence——"

Mrs. Brady made a quick gesture. "The time for *that* is over. Social success has ceased to represent the goal of my ambition."

"Since when, may I ask?"

"Since last night."

"It is somewhat unfortunate that you were persuaded to come here," sneered Mrs. Vanderdecken.

"I quite agree with you. But if I leave suddenly, and if Zara leaves with me, and George follows our example, the exodus may be equally unfortunate for you."

"You propose to break up the house-party unless——"

"Unless you agree to my conditions."

Mrs. Vanderdecken's laugh was not pleasant to hear.

"You take a great deal upon yourself, I must say. Pray have you told your friend Adèle Beaudesart of your supposed discovery?"

"Do you pretend that Adèle Beaudesart is ignorant what sort of woman *you* are?"

"And do you pretend to be ignorant of the sort of woman Adèle Beaudesart is?"

"I am perfectly satisfied with what I have seen and learnt of Adèle. Her follies are those of her set and yours. But she is not wicked—not vicious."

"I don't know what prevents me from ordering you out of my room, and out of my house!" cried Mrs. Vanderdecken, with sudden fury. "*How dare you* presume to dictate terms, to accuse, to threaten——"

Mrs. Brady rose and stood looking with unconcealed contempt at the shaking figure, the quivering lips, the grey hues of the face streaked with false colours.

"I have not threatened," she said, "and my accusations are only too well founded. You best know whether it is politic to face exposure, or avoid it. But you shall not ruin this girl's life as you have ruined others; of that I am determined."

There was a moment's silence. With all her contempt and horror of this woman, Mrs. Brady could not help pitying her as she looked at the ghastly face and heard the heavy, laboured breath-

ing. The excitement that had aroused her to anger was dying out from sheer physical exhaustion, and the glassy look was returning to her eyes.

A lesson, terrible and ominous, was preached in that silence—one that would leave its mark forever on the learner. The ticking of the clock, the soft fall of the wood ash, the very *frou-frou* of the satin wrapper about that figure in the chair seemed to emphasise a crisis of terror.

Mrs. Vanderdecken was not of the type that can brazen out a sin. She was only courageous as long as audacity could stand for courage. Something in this cool Irish face struck fear to the depths of a nature where shallow cowardice sat enthroned. The determination in those watchful eyes robbed her of self-support. If she could have laid her foe dead at her feet, she would have done so; but unhappily the nineteenth century did not lend itself to the desires of personal revenge.

The interlude ended in a spasmodic, hysterical laugh. Trottie Vanderdecken was still under the influence of her drug, and unable to collect any fund of dormant energy for so unexpected a battle.

"I always hated you," she said, "and I always feared your influence with Adèle. But there is no need to prolong this very unpleasant interview. I am ill, unnerved; I want rest. You can do as you please."

Mrs. Brady's heart gave a quick throb of triumph.

"You will change Zara's room?" she asked.

"Yes."

"And she may return with me to Mount Street?"

A spasm crossed Mrs. Vanderdecken's weird face. She nodded sullenly.

"And pursue her profession as she desires—under my guardianship?"

"I shall leave England directly. I am going to Cairo."

"It is the best thing you can do. Of course, you will provide for Zara as you have always done?"

Trottie's white lips parted in an inaudible murmur. She was terribly exhausted, and life presented no joy for her that was not encompassed by lethargy. The noise of whirring wheels, the beat of heavy hammers, made her head and ears an abode of torment, for which there was no present relief.

Oh, for sleep, for rest! Only to be alone, only to deaden sense and thought, and drift aimlessly away amidst leaden clouds of an enfolding peace!

Mrs. Brady saw an awful change come over the weird face, and terrified, she sprang forward and rang the bell.

Victorine answered it with a rapidity worthy of eaves-dropping.

"Your mistress is ill; attend to her!" exclaimed Mrs. Brady.

"Ah, madame is often so," answered the girl, with a shrug of shoulders. "She has not slept enough this time, that is all."

She rearranged the cushions, and lifted the inert feet on to another chair.

Mrs. Brady left the room to the sound of heavy, stertorous breathing.

She felt sick and dizzy, and entered her own chamber with unsteady steps.

"And *this* is what Society does for one! And, this is the life I envied!" she thought.

She threw herself on the bed, shivering in every limb. She felt as if that ghastly, terrible face would haunt her for the rest of her days.

XXIX

THE châtelaine of Weard Hall did not appear at dinner that evening. The grave butler presented a formal excuse worded as "indisposition," and a faint sigh of relief fluttered from three feminine breasts.

George Murphy took Zara in to dinner, Basil Warrender seized upon Mrs. Brady, and Oscar Poseurwitz was made happy by the favour of his liege lady. Lord Chris and Mrs. Gideon Lee made common cause of the emergency, and Tony Chevenix was a law unto himself. Mrs. Brady was in radiant spirits, and kept her companions amused and interested.

"You are like a victor after a well-won fight. Whence this air of triumph?" asked Basil, during the progress of "courses" admirably cooked and admirably served.

"Your guess is not very wide of the mark," she answered. "A bloodless victory has its fascination."

"Still, I don't know with whom you could have fought. There is no spirit of animus or defeat visible—here."

She laughed. "My foes may have been invisible."

"I wonder if that is really so?"

His face betrayed curiosity, and he glanced round the circle. His eyes rested finally on Zara.

"Emancipation has a beneficial effect apparently," he said. "Our young wonder is positively radiant to-night. I was not aware she could talk so much."

Mrs. Brady's glance softened as she watched the two young eager faces opposite. She had never seen George look so happy, and it was to her he owed his chance of happiness.

"I think," she said softly, "that Zara has never had a chance of proving what she can, or can *not* do. She has been kept in leading strings."

"Who has cut them for her to-night?"

She smiled ambiguously. "Oh, events often emancipate one. Life goes on in a sort of groove for years, then a jerk, a turn will displace the whole mechanism."

"Ah, I see. But apparently it needs some guiding hand to readjust it."

"I love youth," she said earnestly. "It is so trustful, so simple, so easily pleased. And we are so hard upon it. Yet when one begins to look back——"

"This is rank heresy. What woman allows

nowadays that she has reach'd even the first stage of 'looking back'?"

"I am speaking seriously," Mr. Warrender. "There is a relief in 'shaking off' pretences sometimes. The mind wants an occasional hour of comfort. A mental dressing-gown and slippers appeal irresistibly to that want."

"Does serious speaking come under the heading of 'dressing-gown and slippers?'" he asked, with a smile.

"Not so much as the absence of pretence. We live too much for others' opinions. I think it would be better to preserve the integrity of our own."

"But what if one's own idea of integrity clashes with that of others?"

"We must have the courage of our own convictions. It is only when we drop that, that we become copyists."

"I'm afraid the copyists are in the majority."

"They are. Hence it behoves us to make our own little stand against the encroachments of modern life."

"It is an unsatisfactory thing at best. Yet what is one to do? Hermits are no longer fashionable, and the monastic life has its fraudulent side. Is it possible to be in the world, and not of it?"

"No," she agreed. "It is the old story of serving two masters. One must love or despise one of them."

"I wonder if I might tell you—something?" he asked in lowered tones.

Her quick, bright glance gave permission.

"It is only that I never can understand your putting up with these people. You are so different in every respect."

"You think I have been trying to serve two masters? Be satisfied. My term of service is almost ended."

"And what then?"

"Oh, I shall not enter a sisterhood, or retire from the world," she said lightly. "My happiness will centre in the happiness of—others."

He followed her glance, and saw it rest on George's down-bent head, and earnest face.

"It is well to be loved like that," he said. "I had not hoped to find any spirit of self-sacrifice left in modern woman."

She made no response, and the conversation became more general owing to a sudden inspiration of Lord Chrissy's. It made its usual demand on public attention.

"I am going to talk to Zara," whispered Adèle to her friend, as they left the room together.

She had heard the result of Mrs. Brady's interview with Trottie Vanderdecken before they had dressed for dinner, and was secretly elated at the victory gained.

Zara, as yet, knew nothing. The room adjoining Mrs. Brady's had been prepared for her, and

she had come down to dinner under the protecting wing of her new-found friend. Assurance of safety, and a certain novel exhilarating feeling had quite banished her terrors of the night. She felt that no harm could come to her now. Her future had been wrested from its would-be gulde, and life in its springtime of Hope and Promise had suddenly thrust innumerable treasures into her eager hands.

Yet when Adèle Beau-desart gently detained her in a quiet corner of the hall she was conscious of surprise. That lovely, frivolous *mondaine* had hitherto appeared somewhat indifferent to her unimportant presence.

"Zara," commenced her new ally, "I hope it's not true that you are leaving us. Mrs. Brady hinted as much this morning."

The girl's face flushed slightly.

"It has to be my intention," she said curtly.

"Let me hope you will change it. It would break up our party, it would create surprise and comment. Some explanation would be asked."

"No doubt, madame. But that does not affect me; at least—it would not—now."

"You mean something has happened that alters your position?"

"Madame your friend has been very kind to me," said the girl softly. "I feel safe so long as she is here, but when she departs, I go to depart also."

"That is quite right. But she does not leave till the week is up. Neither must you, Zara."

"The week! It is long to stay where one is distressed, insulted, unhappy. You do not know, *natürlich*."

"I do not wish to know. I can imagine that a dependent position has its drawbacks. But open defiance will not serve you, child. You are not of age yet. I mean not of an age to be legally independent of a guardian, even one who is self-constituted. Besides, there is your future to be considered."

"I can sing! I will openly adopt my profession. I have no fear."

"What a child you are! The profession you speak of adopting is one of hardship, as well as danger. A girl young, friendless, and beautiful is never safe when she steps into the arena of public life. Besides, no success is immediate. The greatest genius nowadays cannot afford to be independent of managing agents, and they are an expensive necessity."

Zara moved restlessly. "For what do you tell me all this?" she asked.

"Because I am so afraid you will do something rash, something for which you may be sorry. Whereas if you will be guided by a little prudent advice you will offend no one, and greatly assist your own interests. You look bewildered. I will put the case more simply. You have been intro-

duced to a wider circle than you are aware of. Your concert, your voice, your appearance have had public recognition. Everyone knows *who* introduced you, everyone will expect that interest and patronage will still surround your efforts. If they do not, questions will be asked. How are you going to answer such questions?"

"I have not thought."

"Of course not. But if you will trust me, as you trust Mrs. Brady, we shall steer you through all these difficulties, and offend no one."

"That sounds very kind, but how is it that you would serve me when I have angered and offended one who is also your friend?"

"My dear child, in this world we have sometimes to use strange weapons to fight our—friends. Guile and you are unacquainted, but I am not so fortunate. To declare open warfare would often be a relief, but also often it would be very impolitic. Last night's story, for instance, has been translated into a ghost legend for the benefit of all concerned. You must not contradict it, Zara. We are surrounded by the sleuthhounds of our own households. Social ruin would await us often enough if we left them unmuzzled. This may sound very odd and very unintelligible, but it's worth attention. You must have no open quarrel with your protectress. You must stay on here as long as we stay. I promise you that all shall be arranged as you would desire. You will

be permitted to leave Pont Street and stay either with Mrs. Brady or myself, pursuing your musical education under our directions. Then, next season, you can appear on your own merits, well backed, as they say. If you are a success you enter upon a career of independence at once. Does that satisfy you?"

"It sounds all so well," said the girl distrustfully. "But how can I be sure? Madame has always had charge of me. She may insist to keep it."

"Do not fear. She will *not* insist."

"But how can I meet her, speak to her, seem the same as before I have been—after. . . .?" She shuddered.

"Ah! that is what I want to teach you. *That*, my dear, is the hardest lesson for youth to learn—to hide its own scorn of what it scorns. But it is necessary sometimes. The world forces us to assume an aspect of forgiveness to those we know as foes; to exchange smiles and greetings when we would rather hear the clash of steel. It may sound ignoble, but it *has* to be. I know what you would like to do. I have often shared the same feeling, and for the same person. The first cobwebs of bondage may often turn to cords of steel, Zara. No one knows how much an intimacy implies until it is too late to deny its obligations."

The girl looked at her questioningly. By nature

she was not easily daunted, or easily impressed. She had more character than Adèle credited her with possessing, though as yet circumstances had not helped its development.

"Why do you want me to do this?" she asked bluntly.

Adèle looked in surprise she felt.

"Why? . . . I thought I had explained," she said impatiently. "I think it a pity your chances in life should be spoilt by a quarrel with circumstances. You know nothing of life. I do."

"I know I am ignorant. I was always shut away in that great college. I saw only women, or girls like myself, and they were not at all like madame's friends here. Of them all no one has been so kind as Madame Brady. I will do anything that she does wish."

"Her wishes are mine also," said Adèle. "I will send her to talk to you."

She rose and crossed over to where Mrs. Brady was standing by the fireplace. Mrs. Gideon Lee, who was holding forth on the decadence of dramatic art, looked quickly up as she approached.

"Are you hatching a conspiracy with our gipsy friend yonder?" she asked. "What a long, serious talk you were having!"

Adèle smiled enigmatically. "Not exactly," she said; "I was only giving advice."

"She does not impress me as a malleable subject. How very provoking it is of Trottie

to get ill! What *are* we to do with ourselves to-night?

Mrs. Brady moved softly away to the vacant chair by Zara's side, and although the actress's half-closed eyes seemed unobservant, her curiosity increased. She knew nothing of the events of the previous night. She had been denied admission to Trottie's room, and her shrewd instincts were on the alert for discoveries.

Something unusual had happened. There seemed a secret understanding between this feminine trio, and the understanding was co-existent with their hostess's absence.

Adèle Beaudesart was too skilled a fencer to be caught at a disadvantage, and very easily she parried the feints and lunges with which her adversary attacked. Mrs. Gideon Lee was the very last person who ought to guess at what had occurred, and Adèle determined she should learn nothing from her.

Presently the men sauntered in, and the card-tables were set out.

A quartette formed for bridge. Mrs. Brady would not play. She denied herself that excitement for once, and Basil Warrender followed her example. Mrs. Gideon Lee, Adèle Beaudesart, Lord Chris, and Tony Chevenix began with half-sovereign stakes, and were soon absorbed in the game until the complications of scoring produced a scientific discussion that was almost quarrel-

some. Zara slipped away to her room, and George Murphy and his aunt had, so much to say that Basil Warrender was left completely out in the cold, and had to appoint himself umpire to the bridge dispute.

Oscar Poseurenwitz alone was in his element. He gave to the Steinway grand the undivided attention denied to himself, and steeped his senses and the room in harmonies as wonderful as his own invention.

There was a sense of restraint everywhere—a feeling that something had happened, though its happening was ignored. Lord Chris was perturbed and preoccupied. His usual glib nonsense fell less readily from his tongue. He lost heavily through a persistent habit of raising the stakes, but that did not affect him. He played for money because it was exciting. Whether he lost or won made little difference.

“Are we not to have our Decameron to-night?” asked Mrs. Gideon Lee in an interval of dealing. “You must really promise not to shock us quite so much, Lord Chris. I positively trembled last night. Your audacity was as bad as the private picture exhibitions. Only one is allowed to see *them* in the dark.”

“How can one see them in the dark?” asked Tony Chevenix. “Or do you mean a ‘cat show,’ Mrs. Lee?”

“I only went once to such an exhibition. I

assure you the room *was* in total darkness. You couldn't tell who was there, but the picture was, of course, in a brilliant light. One could see that."

"A sacrifice to English prudery," murmured Lord Chris, smothering a yawn. "To see each other would be so perfectly proper that it is prohibited; but to see each other looking at a nude goddess would require the licensing of the Moral Censor! Of course, art is not so real as a looking-glass."

Mrs. Gideon Lee gave a silly laugh. She always laughed at Lord Chris when she was in doubt of his meaning. It helped her out of many difficulties.

"But about the stories," she persisted.

"No—not to-night," he answered wearily. "At least I will not take up my parable. Of course, anyone is at liberty to sequelise my little *novelette* who wishes to do so. One of you ladies, for instance."

"I think the series had better end as it began; with *you*, Chris," said Basil Warrender.

"You are careful of susceptibilities, Basil. For my part I wish I could realise what a moral shock means. But I have never denied myself anything, and in consequence there is nothing left to experience."

"You do say such dreadful things, Lord Chris," ¹simpered Mrs. Gideon Lee. "It is absolutely im-

possible that you can have realised *everything*. Murder, for instance."

"I have committed even murder—in imagination. Murder more terrible, more subtle, than any criminal has designed. All crimes, even as all pleasures, are produced in the brain. *That* is the real playground of life. Anyone can enter it and choose his own sport. Anyone, that is to say, who is not afraid of himself."

"Of the border-line of insanity beyond," said Basil Warrender.

"I think the dear mad people, whom the prejudices of society condemn to social banishment, are the happiest and most enviable in the world."

"They certainly live longer than the sane ones," said Adèle Beaudesart. "Or, rather, if it is the sane who are insane, according to you, Chrissy, we lunatics pay the penalty for them."

"And pay our keepers too," he said.

Mrs. Gideon Lee glanced up quickly.

"We are forgetting the game," she said.

"Your deal, Tony."

XXX

MRS. BRADY retired early.

She had an idea that Adèle Beaudesart would come to her room in order to discuss the problem of Zara's future, so she dismissed Eugénie as soon as her hair was brushed, and her gown removed.

It was not long before the expected knock heralded her friend.

She threw herself into a chair with an exclamation of weariness.

"I'm tired out. I got entangled with one of Chrissy's discussions, and I thought it would never end. Besides, the luck was all against me. I must have dropped at least a hundred. You were wise not to play. I suppose you expected me?"

"Yes. I wanted to hear the result of your discussion with Zara."

"She was a little difficult at first, but I talked her over. She will stop as long as you and I do."

"Every day will be a purgatory to me," said Mrs. Brady. "I almost wish you hadn't persuaded me, Adèle."

"Don't go back on your track, Perenna. It's not fair."

"Oh, I have no intention of doing *that*."

There was a moment's silence. The gloom deepened on Adèle's brow, and Mrs. Brady watched her with some anxiety.

"I wish it wasn't so hard to find where one's moral courage is located," she said suddenly.

"I want mine badly, but it seems to have disappeared. I'd like nothing better than to speak my mind to Trottie, and yet here I am sparing her feelings and keeping up appearances."

"I suppose you have good and sufficient reasons?" said Mrs. Brady.

"I am selfish enough to think so. At all events we are three to two. You and I and Zara, against Trottie and the Gideon Lee woman. How I hate her!"

"But, Adèle——"

"Oh, my dear, don't mind what I say. I'm in a thoroughly bad temper."

• She threw herself back, clasping her hands behind her head.

• "I ought to have gone on as I was going, or—I ought never to have met *you*. • You have made me think and you have made me regret. And also you have made me commit one unselfish action."

Mrs. Brady did not ask what that action was. Perhaps she guessed only too well.

"And now," continued Adèle, "I seem to have reached a blank wall at the end of my journey. These people and I have grown used to one another. We all know we are ridiculous, but we don't care. Trottie is the head and chief of our offences—bar one, who shall be nameless. To tear myself away means the uprooting of innumerable tendrils. Goodness knows how far they have spread, or how hard they may be to unwind! Oh! how sick I am of pretending not to be sick of it all! Even one's manners are false. We have to seem soft and sweet and smiling, while our hearts are brimming with spite and hatred and contempt."

"We went over all this once before, did we not?" said Mrs. Brady gently. "It is the natural reaction after leading an unnatural life. Could you not give it up, Adèle?"

"Could *you*?"

"I mean to. I have had a lesson that will last my life. It has cured me of a foolish ambition. It has made me thankful that I am an insignificant person whose presence will not be missed—even at the dog's tea-parties."

Adèle dropped her arms, and looked at her. "Does that mean you won't come to London again?"

"It does. I don't say that we are ultra-strict moralists in Ireland; that we have not our spites and jealousies and scandals. But between life there

and *here*, the set I know and the set whose notice I coveted, there is a great gulf fixed."

"Your are not complimentary to your sponsor," said Adèle a little bitterly.

"My sponsor needs no more sugared falsehoods. She knows the truth of my words."

"Wishes are vain things," said Adèle, rising abruptly. She stood leaning against the mantelpiece, looking down into the fire.

"Oh, if I had only met you ten years sooner!" she cried passionately. "When I was still a girl, when I had a heart—not a stone in my breast! But marriage killed anything that was good out of me. And to hide the shame and loathing that were eating out my very life, I plunged into the fastest, maddest phase of this hateful social existence. Now—what can I do? What am I fit for? Just to live on season for season, driving, dining, dancing! A vain fool living for vain follies. And my looks will fade, and people will say how soon I have 'gone off,' and there will be only two alternatives left—to repair by art the ravages of Time, or drop out of the race and be forgotten. I am not thirty, Perenna, and yet I have begun to dread the toll of the years to come: the cruel years that take everything from us, our youth, our beauty, our figures, and give us no compensation!"

"Would it not be wiser, then, to lay up some store of comfort for ourselves, Adèle? Love,

friendship, kindness, charity—these we may gain or give if we will.”

“Not such women as I,” said Adèle Beaudesart bitterly. “Love has passed me by. The only man for whom I have ever felt——”

She broke off abruptly, and began unpinning the loose waves of her coiled hair, her eyes on the glass that showed her pale and stormy face.

“Where is Zara?” she asked abruptly.

Mrs. Brady pointed to the door dividing her room from the dressing-room beyond.

“I wonder if she is asleep. I should like to see her asleep,” continued Adèle. “God knows, I have no cause to love that girl. She has been the marplot of more than one well-laid scheme. But for all that I am glad she will be rid of us. At least, she will be safe—with you.”

She moved towards the door, and Mrs. Brady followed. She was perplexed and distressed by her friend's strange mood, and stranger accusations. The Adèle Beaudesart of to-night was showing another phase of character—one quite unfamiliar.

The door of the next room was unlocked. Adèle Beaudesart turned the handle softly, and stood looking in.

A night lamp by the bedside showed the girl's quiet form, sleep-bound and motionless. Her dark hair flooded the pillows; her face looked like carved marble in its chiselled outlines.

Step by step Adèle approached until she reached the bed. There she remained gazing down at the sleeper, her merciless eyes noting every point of beauty and of youth—the beauty and the youth that could never again be her own, the beauty and youth that had laid their spell on the only man whose heart she had ever craved to win.

She had lost him, and all the zest of life had emptied itself into that loss. Yet she could not hate her unconscious rival, nor bring herself to blame him for his choice.

A few bitter tears gathered in her eyes as she stood silently there. Her heart whispered, “Such a one was I—once.”

• But that “once” was the hollow echo of any pride or joy in the past. She saw the whiteness of virgin youth smirched and desecrated, and made horrible as hell. She saw the garden of nature trampled and laid waste. She saw herself the sport of years and the chosen goddess of Folly. She stood alone, and looked at these things as one looks at shapes in a mirror. Regret was as useless now as rebellion had been in those far-off days. She forced back her tears, and turned away from the sleeper. That chill of self-restraint imposed by the education of the world clasped her with cold steadfastness.

• Her lips set themselves firm with an unspoken resolution as she again passed into the outer room. Her heart had begun to teach her a new

son, to speak a new language. Some sort of strength seemed born within her as jealousy died out. The accusations of her own maimed nature filled her with contemptuous pity.

"As if any man could hesitate in such a choice!" she said to herself. "How wise he was! . . . And what a fool—I!"

She held out her hands without a word, and instinctively her friend guessed what it was she could not speak. Silence answered silence, but the door closed on comprehension.

It is only in a crisis of life that a nature gets shaken out of a groove which has seemed its natural travelling route. The readjustment of oneself to altered circumstances is as bewildering as the readjustment of one's bruised limbs and terrified senses after a railway accident.

Mrs. Brady was undergoing this ordeal. She felt sleep would be impossible until she had gone thoroughly over the facts leading to her present situation.

The lightness and carelessness with which she had entered upon a journey so suddenly momentous, appalled her. How could she have accepted a position which laid her open to very questionable suspicions? She had told herself it was for George she had done it. For his sake she had desired the passport to the "smart" world. For him she had planned to secure a wealthy

wife. To ease his burdens and to assist his career she had worked and schemed.

And lo! it was all useless. George had his own ideas of independence, his own plans of happiness. Money and position did not enter into them any longer. The ground had fallen suddenly away beneath her feet, and she found herself contemplating a dark pitfall from which a chance hand had rescued her.

A girl's hand.

The one unconsidered, unheeded personality that had mixed with this gay crowd. The one ignored influence passed by unconsciously amidst noise and struggle and confusion. "I am not a fool, and I am not ignorant. Yet but for Zara I should never have known to what I was lending myself," she thought.

The question of extrication again forced itself upon her notice. Her pity for Adèle Beaudesart, her contempt for Trottie Vanderdecken, her anxiety for Zara, met her on neutral ground for cooler judgment, and took each its appportioned place. Severance from this set held no fears of future social ostracism, supposing she desired to re-establish herself. But to-night she felt a singular indifference towards such re-establishment.

"I have had twenty years' experience of the world," she reflected, "and ended up with an experiment that I can never forget. I think I

may retire now. If George is happy, and if I can assist him to gain his heart's desire, I have secured all I need. We can't stand sponsors for our children's future, nor be their Providence, though we would give our heart's blood to do it."

She quoted half unconsciously those words of the Persian poet—

"I sent my Soul through the Invisible,
Some secret of that after-life to spell,
And by-and-by my Soul returned to me
And answered, 'I myself am Heaven and Hell.'"

* * * * *

That was what it meant to be a Soul. Heaven or Hell to—itself.

* * * * *

"I suppose Adèle is right," she went on. "Worldly-wise; but this is a case for worldly wisdom. Nothing would be gained by open warfare. A great deal may be saved by a truce. At least, I can fight for Zara and for George. There is a day of reckoning in store for Trottie Vanderdecken before I say good-bye to her for ever!"

XXXI

MRS. VANDERDECKEN raised her head from a nest of pillows, and gazed drowsily about the room.

A consciousness of something that had happened, something disturbing and unpleasant, clung about her half-deadened senses. She closed her eyes and lay back, and tried to remember what it was.

Her troop of familiars thronged about her: It was to none of them surely she owed this passing discomfort. One by one she passed them in review. Then a sudden stab of memory thrust her into the presence of one stern accuser, and shame and anger rent aside the filmy veil of subterfuge.

"That woman . . . that it should be that woman. And from the first I hated her. It is all Adèle's fault. But I wish I could remember how it all came about."

She rang for the maid. "What is the time, Victorine?" she asked.

"It is the midday, madame. The bell has just sounded for *déjeuner*. Shall I bring some to madame?"

"Midday, but what day, Victorine—Christmas?"

"No, madame; that has passed. It is *le jour après le Noel*, what one calls *le jour de Boxe* in this country."

"The 26th of December," murmured Mrs. Vanderdecken vaguely. "Is it possible I have slept for two days? Then perhaps I only dreamt——"

She rose abruptly.

"Bring me some tea, and prepare my bath. I will get up. Did I sleep all day yesterday, Victorine?"

"Madame does not remember? *Tiens*, but that is strange. Madame rose and made her toilet, *en négligé*, of course, and had one long interview with the Irish lady called 'de Brady' by her maid. Madame was much upset by the interview, and insist that I inject the soothing drops, and then she sleep. It is but the first time now that madame awakes."

Mrs. Vanderdecken made no reply. Her eyes gazed vacantly before her. Her head felt like an empty sieve. Thoughts came and slipped away ere she could grasp them. Memory offered only dim outlines of trouble yet unfaced by irresolute faculties.

"They are all well? All here? . . . No one has left?" she asked presently.

"Left? *Mais non*, madame. They seem well

amused. They have the horses, the bicycles, the cards, the music; they walk, they drive, they dress. *Tout à fait la même chose!*"

Trottie closed her eyes again. The irony of the maid's speech struck her with a sudden savage truth. Always "*la même chose!*"

She was not missed, not desired, not of any personal consequence to these so-called friends who entertained themselves at her expense, and used her house as an hotel, and had not even sent a message of inquiry about her absence.

"I will break the whole party up. I will return to London," she said furiously. "Why should I trouble my head about these idiots?"

And in a white heat of passion she had herself dressed, and went downstairs.

Luncheon was over. The day had clouded, and a fine soft rain was falling. Four of the party, consisting of Lord Chris, Tony Chevenix, Mrs. Gideon Lee, and Basil Warrender, were playing ping-pong. Adèle Beaudesart was talking to Zara. George and Mrs. Brady were not there.

"Hallo, Trottie, welcome back to your ancestral halls. How are you?" called out Lord Chris, as he sent the tiny celluloid ball flying across the table, and scored "vantage."

"I am perfectly well," she answered, taking in who were present with a glance. "I hope you've managed to amuse yourselves in my absence."

"Oh yes! But, truthfully speaking, this is a

dull hole. You won't be able to endure it much longer, I'm sure."

"I don't intend to endure it," she said coolly.

"I shall go back to town to-morrow."

The ping-pong players stopped to look at her.

"Our convenience is always a petty and unimportant thing," remarked Lord Chris. "Are you giving us the sack for any reason, Trottie? How have we incurred your royal displeasure?"

"It has nothing to do with you. I have taken a dislike to the place. All experiments are not successful."

"This one certainly promises no exception to the rule," laughed Lord Chris. "Tony, you serve."

Mrs. Vanderdecken approached Zara.

The girl's pearl-like pallor flushed with angry flame. She sprang to her feet, regardless of Adèle's detaining hand.

Two souls leaped to conflict as their eyes met. No words could have matched such bitter defiance as the girl's flaming glance, or such shamed fear as looked out from the woman's. But Trottie recovered herself quickly. A long apprenticeship to the world has its uses.

"I want you, Adèle," she said. "Will you come to the library? Zara, my child, we are leaving here by the first train in the morning. Will you tell Coralie what to pack for you? Victorine has her hands full."

"I—I do not go with you to Pont Street," said Zara in a low, restrained voice, harsh from strong feeling.

"No, dearest. Pont Street is in confusion. The workmen, you know. I shall go to Claridge's. Adèle has kindly offered to put you up."

Zara moved quickly away.

Lowered lids hid Trottie's averted eyes. Whether the battle was postponed or not, at least its challenge had been unuttered.

She drew a deep breath. "Come, Adèle," she said. And the two women swept side by side into the gloomy silence of the deserted room beyond.

Once there and alone, Mrs. Vanderdecken faced round with the fierceness of baffled rage.

"Tell me everything," she said. "How dared that woman approach me? What is known?"

"Nothing. You need have no fear. Everyone thinks Zara was frightened by the ghost, and that the haunted room chanced to be hers. It was a fortunate legend for the house, and for you, Trottie."

"And—the Irishwoman?" murmured Trottie vindictively.

"You saw her yesterday."

"I—I was not myself. I have forgotten. I can't remember what passed."

Adèle told her what had passed, and what had been promised, and she listened silently. "I should give up that drug if I were you, Trottie,"

she concluded. "Its effects are becoming disastrous. I wonder you are not afraid. Of course, we have agreed that our bodies are quite unimportant inconveniences, but as long as we inhabit them they demand a little consideration."

"I am sick of life! Sick—sick—sick!" cried Trottie, a sudden desperate misery leaping into her weird eyes. She threw herself down on an old-fashioned leather couch, and gave way to hysterical sobbing.

The contrast between that ancient, time-honoured piece of furniture and the prostrate figure with its modern gown, its modern head, its clenched and falsely whitened hands, struck upon Adèle Beaudesart's notice with a sense of horror. Was this life? Was this womanhood? Or was it but a Living Lie that Fashion had created to cheat the crazy fancies of a world it ruled?

On the wings of Idleness and Wealth this foolish creature had been carried hither and thither, without thought of any other responsibility than what she owed her varying moods. To this pass had she come.

Sick of life. Well, what wonder? Such life as she knew.

What did it hold?

No love worth the name; no fidelity that was not purchased by wealth, or retained by fear; no pleasure that was the natural outcome of unspoilt

feelings; no peace that was not drug-sodden; no memory that was not stained by regret.

These thoughts rushed wildly through Adèle's brain as she watched that paroxysm of despair.

Events had forced her into an abnormal situation, and Trottie Vanderdecken represented some strange Nemesis she had recklessly chosen to challenge, and now sought to appease.

The sobs died away. An inflamed and tear-drenched face lifted itself from the couch, and a sullen voice addressed Adèle.

"Why don't you help me? Why don't you suggest something? Can't I defy this woman? Who is she, after all? A mere social nobody. Her tongue could be silenced. You have some influence, have you not?"

"I have no influence over Zara Eberhardt," said Adèle coldly. "And Zara Eberhardt has claimed Mrs. Brady's protection."

"But she is going to you——"

"I think not."

"I—you heard me tell her."

"Oh yes; but Zara is not at all inclined to obedience. She has cut the strings of your authority with absolute determination. You know she is a pagan creature, and has only the primitive virtues of nature to set against our artificial teachings. She had a sharp and sudden awakening, Trottie. You, at least, can never send her to sleep again."

Mrs. Vanderdecken drew herself up, into a

sitting position, and carefully touched and patted her waved *toupée* into the latest fashionable angle.

She was becoming calmer, and with renewed composure came the dread of annoyance. She hated annoyance. As far as was possible she had evaded it on other stringent occasions. It seemed hard that it should dodge the heels of a philanthropic action.

To lose her hold on Zara meant a great deal. There would be no sensation to create next season. No interest in the narrowing circle of her own life.

It was a very narrow circle now, and she knew it. A fixed idea to shut out all that was unpleasant, or tragic, or suffering, had left her confused as to the substance and shadows of existence. Emotions that were allowable occasionally shuddered away from emotions that were not. She had dreaded any disturbance of her elder-down comfort, and managed to avoid it with considerable success. Now all had grown intricate, and she was called upon for a decision. A thing she abhorred.

She turned viciously on Adèle at last.

"Whatever on earth possessed you to take up that odious woman?" she cried. "See what she has done! Chrissy warned me against having her here, and yet you would bring her. I suppose it was on account of George, and he has turned into the most unaccountable prig! For goodness'

sake, get them out of the house, and never let me see them again! I feel quite ill at the bare idea."

"You are breaking up the party yourself. It can easily be arranged," answered Adèle. "The obnoxious element may be conveyed in a different carriage. Zara, Perenna, George, and I."

"You are going to take their part? Is that your idea of friendship?"

"It is my idea of justice. One may make a false step on the threshold, Trottie, but one need not follow it up. A few moments ago you said you were sick of this life. I can say the same. We have played a game for high stakes—and lost. Now we know it was never worth playing. Those who have looked on and those who have joined in it, are alike weary. Let it end. If we must set a fashion, let it be one of seeming better than we are, not worse."

Trottie stared at her with lack-lustre eyes. She could hardly believe it was Adèle who spoke.

"Are you turning preacher?" she asked viciously. "If so, spare me your sermons and your platitudes. When I feel in a religious mood I go to the Evening Dress Service at St. George's, Curzon Street. I find that quite sufficiently edifying."

Adèle laughed contemptuously.

"I have known you, long enough, Trottie, to know that nothing short of a miracle can change you, and miracles don't happen nowadays, even

at St. George's, Curzon Street. It is the cruellest satire on ourselves that our very religion has become associated with our toilets. That our souls are offered a full-dress service as the means of introducing us to the Creator whom we mock with every hour of our lives!"

Trottie Vanderdecken rose suddenly. The anger in her face played havoc with Victorine's complexion aids, but she had forgotten everything in the natural heat and indignation of the moment.

"Cant!" she cried. "And cant from you, Adèle. You! I shall hear next that you have become a convert and entered a convent, or a sisterhood, or something."

"I wish I could!" cried Adèle, with sudden passion. "But at least I should require a clean record and a fair name. Trottie—have you ever thought what it would mean to see *one's own soul*?"

I have seen mine."

She turned then, and left the room.

Trottie's dulled eyes watched her retreating figure. She heard the sharp click of the closed door. Then she fell back on the couch, covering her face with shuddering hands.

Why had Adèle said that?

To see *one's own soul*?

Could such a thing ever be? Had the Universe an unwritten law? Was there a limit to the defiance of Creator and creature? Were those

terrors from which she fled, those sleepless hours she sought to drug into senselessness, those horrors that pursued her, and against which she locked door after door in futile resistance, were such things to continue? An eternal punishment awful as it was inevitable!

She shivered from head to foot.

With such force as Nature had left her she cursed her miserable fate. She had brought it on herself. She could not get away from it. With each readjustment of her faculties, with each return to consciousness, she had felt that life held a growing terror. Even to herself she could not act—always.

“I am no worse than others,” she told herself now, as she rocked to and fro in a spasm of mental agony. “This will pass. It is only a dark hour. I shall forget. I shall take up life again. I shall enjoy——”

A dry sob rattled in her throat and choked her utterance. Nature, maimed and insulted, and denied for long, insensate years, was taking sudden sharp vengeance on terrible wrongs.

She lay there sick, shuddering, afraid. The air vibrated with self-accusations, and amidst the turmoil of her aching brain she heard again and again those parting words of Adèle Beaude-sart’s—

“Have you ever thought what it would mean to see *one’s own soul*?”

XXXII

THE rain had ceased.

Mrs. Brady threw on a thick cloak and went out into the grounds.

The hall was empty as she passed through, but on the first terrace she was joined by Basil Warrender.

"Have you received your marching orders?" he asked. "Do you know we are all to leave to-morrow?"

She stopped, and looked up at his face in unconcealed surprise. "No, I have heard nothing. Are you jesting?"

"Indeed I am not. Mrs. Vanderdecken informed us that she had had enough of this place. She was going away. Naturally we cannot remain. I am surprised you have heard nothing."

"Where is Mrs. Vanderdecken?"

"She and Lady Beaudesart retired to the library for confidences. I suppose they are there still. We others ping-ponged ourselves into collapse, and then dispersed as the sun came out."

"I wonder where Zara is. I have not seen her since luncheon."

"I wonder where your nephew is. I have not seen him since luncheon. How naturally youth flies to youth!"

"It is only natural. I think, Mr. Warrender, we want something that is natural and wholesome and simple in this atmosphere of insincerity."

His face took on a shade of gravity.

"Don't include me in that accusation. I assure you my reason for coming here was one quite apart from this set and its vagaries."

"I came because Adèle wished it," said Mrs. Brady simply. "I am sorry now, and yet one is never too old to be taught the lessons of life."

He gave her a quick, apprehensive glance.

"Seriously," he said, "I was sorry to find you here. Selfishly, I was glad, which thing is an allegory taken without explanation. I have a great admiration for you, Mrs. Brady. I hope we may be friends; not such friends as Society holds in its loose and changeful clasp, but friends who know and appreciate life and its manifold meanings; who have the strength to avoid and the courage to select."

"I have only lately learnt how easily one lays one's acts open to misinterpretation," she answered. "Perhaps the lesson was needed. I took people and events at their own valuation till I came here."

"And what has changed you?"

"Very little, and yet a great deal," she said.

"I shall say good-bye to Society for a long time ; I am going back to Ireland."

"That sounds almost tragic," he said, with a smile. "Will it be possible to find you in that land of love, valour, and confusion?"

She laughed also. "Oh; quite possible. Are you hinting an invitation?"

"Indeed I am: I shall come in pursuit of the primitive virtues denied by Lord Chris as existent."

"I hope you will not bring him with you."

"Certainly not," he said promptly. "The pursuit of friendship is limited in this instance."

"You said the pursuit was in search of primitive virtues."

"Are they incompatible with such regard and such reverence as a man feels for a true woman?"

His tone was so earnest and his face so grave that Mrs. Brady was conscious of slight embarrassment. She looked at him. There was a question in her eyes.

"We will come out of the hurly-burly and meet on new ground," he continued. "Here it is impossible to know the real person. We play at pretences until we are unable to distinguish truth from falsehood. But it grows wearisome; I am very tired of it. Are you?"

"Very," she answered quietly.

"I was sure of it; I have often watched you. It seemed to me that you had an extraordinarily

healthy way of looking at things. I used to wonder if it was genuine."

"You seem to have taken some trouble," she said.

"It was too interesting to be that. May I ask you something? Do not answer unless you wish."

"Well?"

"Are you not responsible in some way for this disorganisation—this sudden alteration of plans?"

Her face grew suddenly warm. "Yes," she said.

He drew a quick, sharp breath. "I felt sure of it. Sooner or later I knew you would find your way to the surface of *la Vie Intime*, organised and demoralised by its inventors. I said, 'She is human and natural, and out of place.' Then I looked for a motive."

"Frankly, I had none; I let myself be the sport of chance. Once it blew me into this feather-brained assemblage, I remained. It seemed only a playground for ridiculous games. My chief wonder was that they could keep on playing at enjoyment of them."

"They will keep on playing the games and pretending the enjoyment as long as life lasts," he said. "There are only two things for which Society cares nowadays. Pleasure at any cost, and Wealth because it can purchase pleasure. Grief cannot pierce its armour of selfishness, nor love melt its frigid apathy. The only passion

encouraged is that of the senses. Honour and decency and self-respect are old-fashioned words that have no place in a modern dictionary."

"Yet feeling and knowing this, you merged your own life into that of the *Vie Intime*?"

"Necessity drew me into a net; curiosity impelled me to stay. You are the only external force that has made me feel ashamed of the bondage, and eager to sever its meshes."

"I? . . . But I thought you classed me with these people?"

"At first—yes. I am wiser now."

"I—I think I see George and Zara coming through the plantation," she said hurriedly, "I want to speak to her."

He laid a detaining hand on her arm.

"Do you think they need us? Do you think we need them? I have not made half my confession yet. I wanted to ask your sympathy for a poor portrait painter who has had his soul awakened, his judgment enslaved, and his heart stolen. It is a very sad story, I assure you. Will you give it a hearing?"

"Not here," she said, with sudden gravity, "Not now."

"Where, then—and when?"

"Perhaps when you pay that visit to Ireland," she said, smiling. "It takes time, Mr. Warrender, to readjust one's opinions of a person."

"Suppose I have never been the person you

imagined? I too had a part to play in this comedy. The curtain has gone down on it for the last time. The Wheel of Fortune has suddenly turned. If you won't listen to one confession, will you hear another? I wanted you to be the first—"

She stopped suddenly and faced him. "Oh, I hope you have not become suddenly rich. It would be such a story-book ending. And—somehow now—I have become afraid of wealth. It is the Evil Spirit of the World; its Genius of Destruction."

"That is so exactly my opinion," he said, "that I made up my mind to ask someone whose advice I could rely upon, to help me in the arduous task of spending mine not unwisely, or too well. I have had the misfortune to inherit a fortune—and a title. The news came this morning. Then I took my courage in both hands and came to you. Dear lady, shall we go out together from this stifling atmosphere of falsehood and luxury into the purer air of Truth? Shall we accept Fortune's gifts with humility and thankfulness, and prove to the world that life is not merely a vain race in the pursuit of pleasure?"

He held out his hand as they stood face to face, the fading winter sunlight falling on their heads. There was something humorous yet pleading in his eyes, and her first surprise merged into a pardonable pride of conquest, remembering what

she had heard of the handsome painter's indifference to women.

She frankly gave the hand his own demanded, but the humour of the situation touched her to uncontrollable mirth.

"I really don't know how much you mean," she laughed. "Or if this is only a new act in a new comedy. I should not like to lose your good opinion, or your friendship, Mr. Warrender (you have not told me your new title), but I have never thought of you in any more serious light."

"There is time and opportunity to remedy that omission," he said, smiling again. "Our years match too well to play Romeo and Juliet. Only promise to give me a hearing later on. Let me prove to you that I look upon life as a responsible heritage, and that I can reverence a good and honest woman as God's best gift to the incomplete man."

"Supposing your opinion is incorrect? If, as you say, we are not of an age to play Romeo and Juliet, neither are we of an age to make a regrettable mistake."

"That is true. I suppose I have the conceit of my own powers of observation, when I say I am content to abide by their verdict."

"But you are inclined to limit mine," she said demurely. "I have not had the time or the opportunity to devote my judgment to a study of

your character. Besides, I candidly tell you I have never given a thought to a second marriage."

"I am glad to hear it. You can now set about thinking of one, with due regard to myself as the instigator of the idea."

"You ought to have a drop of Irish blood somewhere," she laughed, "That speech was worthy of one of my own countrymen."

"I have a drop—in fact, several. When I questioned you about your country, it was as much from interest as from curiosity. My title and possessions come to me in a most extraordinary fashion through a branch of the family suddenly extinct; an Irish branch. So you see how fitting and important it is that I should have an Irish wife to pilot me through the shoals and currents of strange waters. It is a country of which I know nothing. Won't you lend me a guiding hand?"

Again she laughed, but the colour rose becomingly to her cheek, and she drew away the hand he had so long detained.

"You may come and see me in Dublin," she said. "I shall return there at the end of the month."

"It's as beautiful as a picture you're looking to-night, ma'am," remarked Eugénie, as she affixed the last pin and shook out the lace flounce of her mistress's gown, "And as if years had been lifted off your head," she added.

Eldorado limped lazily after her. Suddenly she paused and looked back at the group below.

At George standing protectingly by Zara's side. At Lord Chris lighting his cigarette from that of Tony Chevenix. At Oscar Poseurenwitz sprawling on the rug before the fire. At Mrs. Brady surrounded by the remaining figures, and laughing up into Basil Warrender's admiring eyes.

On that figure in its rose-pink velvet robe, with its audacious, triumphant air, its wholesome, untampered-with, well-preserved womanhood, the weird and envious gaze rested longest.

"If I were not a coward I would end it all to-night!" she muttered in her throat.

Then she passed on to her room and her maid, and the wearisome tedious obligations that were supposed to lessen her age, and improve her appearance.

She must take up the burden of life on the morrow. She must still reign as Queen of Sensations—Ruler of the *Vie Intime*, or——

Her eye fell on the little case by her bedside.

How easy it would be to end it all! If only she were not a coward! If only she were sure she would not meet that soul she had denied and desecrated *here*, in some vast avenging Beyond!

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